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Lisa Martens
CUNY City College

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What Grows in Heavy Rain

Lisa Martens

Thesis - Spring 2015 MFA Creative Writing

Most Recent Reviews of Eliza's in La Garita, Alajuela, Costa Rica

★★★★★ Highly Recommend!

I stayed at Eliza's with my daughter during the "green" season. I was worried about the insects (west nile, malaria) since Costa Rica is a tropical country, but I found out that it's actually pretty developed here. Eliza, who rents the cottages, was always willing to help out and knows all of the "local" places to go. And her English is great! The gardener was very nice and usually picked fruit and cut open coconuts for us. It's definitely off the beaten path...there's a little store, a soccer field, and a church. It's perfect if you have kids or if you're looking to get away.

Bring cash, though...the bank is kind of hard to get to, and won't always give out dollars.

Also, this isn't really about Eliza's but for all of Costa Rica: If your Spanish is good, try to pass as a local...they charge more for Americans. Most tourist spots have a "local" price and a "foreigner" price. It gets pretty irritating.

★★★★★ Home away from home

Eliza's has been my home away from home for over ten years. I come here every year to get away from winters in Canada. Eliza's is still in a pretty tiny Costa Rican town...the country as a whole has changed SO MUCH but la garita has not. If you want to see how real TICOS live, come to Eliza's. I almost want to leave a bad review so no one else discovers what I feel like is my own little secret!

★ Far away. Disappointing. Don't bother.

Geographically, Eliza's looks like it's about a half hour from the beach, and since it's close to the city San Jose, you'd think there'd be something here, right? WRONG. Eliza doesn't even have transportation, and getting a cab to any major attraction from here will cost at least fifty bucks. None of the stores or restaurants in la garita are open past 8. They had a gay bar and I'm not gay but I was like, at least SOMETHING is here, but the locals got so upset that the "gays" were so close to their precious church that it got shut down. Apparently there USED to be a karaoke place, and there USED to be a good wing place . . . let me tell you, Costa Ricans are SO OBSESSED with telling you what USED to be somewhere, but there's not SHIT there now.

Let's see what else: the internet sucks, the power goes out whenever there's a storm, and your shower will run out of hot water after like fifteen minutes. There's this chick who bangs all the gardeners which is mildly entertaining, but I didn't come to Costa Rica to hear some blonde ride the cock carousel. You're better off . . . *[read more]*

★★★ Nice, but lacking

I came to Eliza's for three weeks with my two kids. If you don't have kids, this won't be such a big deal, but with two little ones, this place leaves a lot to be desired. No car seats, no high chairs, no gates for the pools, the animals (chickens, stray cats) were just allowed to roam free. Even the playground was a rusty death trap—It was the last place I would have let my children play. The neighbors have cows, which I thought was nice at first, but then I learned that there are these large green flies that can lay eggs in your hair, and then that was it for the cows.

Eliza's is definitely a not-for-tourist experience (which I normally like when I'm traveling solo), but having to go all the way to the grocery store for diapers or wipes was definitely a pain (the local store has some generic diapers, but my kids have sensitive skin and almost immediately broke out in diaper rashes).

In the time we were there, Eliza fired two gardeners and hired another one. I'm not really sure why, but I had the sense that one of them stole . . . [*read more*]

★★★★★ It actually IS normal. Eliza's is amazing.

As someone who has been traveling through Latin America for twenty years, I can assure everyone that electric shower heads are a common and popular alternative to propane. Buy a guide book and turn your caps lock off.

Eliza has been renting space in her house for as long as I've been coming to Costa Rica. I remember when there was only one hotel at Jaco beach, and the whole place was covered in shells . . . times change, I guess, but her place stays more or less the same. She's always willing to make you breakfast and give you some life advice while she's at it!

This is a great base for exploring the central valley. If you want to be just close yet just far enough from a little bit of everything, this is the place to be. I usually leave most of my bigger stuff here and take an overnight bag everywhere else. It truly feels like home. If you're looking for a canned, resort-type place, don't come here. This is for low-key people—retired folks getting their houses built, freelancers, or, like me, ex-lawyers turned world travelers! And ask about the haunted . . . *[read more]*

★ WTF HOW IS THIS PLACE ALLOWED TO BE OPEN

DO NOT COME HERE!!! THEY HAVE ELECTRIC WIRES IN THE SHOWERS AND THEY SAY IT'S NORMAL!!! THIS WAS MY FIRST TIME IN COSTA RICA AND I WAS SO TERRIFIED I LEFT AFTER A WEEK WTF WHY ISN'T THIS PLACE ILLEGAL?! YOU CAN GET ELECTROCUTED AND DIE.

Chapter 1: New Hires

“I can make bars for the windows.”

“Bars look so ugly, though. I would feel like I’m in jail, not my own home.”

Luis put his oil-stained hands on his hips and looked up for an answer. The wrinkles around his eyes deepened.

“I can make them look like flowers, and paint them white. They’ll look nice, Doña Eliza. If you don’t like them, I’ll take them off. I could also let you use one of my guns.”

Someone had broken into Eliza’s house in the middle of the night. They had pushed the thin panes of glass out of her kitchen window, placed them gingerly on the patio, and climbed in. Eliza had heard something and had come downstairs to investigate. Whoever it was had scrambled out the window and stepped on one of the glass panes in the process. There was some blood on the broken glass. Luis looked at the space in the window. Small. Whoever had done this was thin, limber, probably young.

Maybe he stepped on the glass, and then grabbed for it with his bare hands, Luis thought. That makes him desperate, not smart.

“A gun? Luis, could you imagine me shooting someone, anyone? Especially over what, a toaster? It’s better to just let thieves go. We’ll try the bars first,” Doña Eliza concluded. She was

already tying a rag to the end of a handle to mop up the blood. “Let’s just get this cleaned up before anyone else sees.”

Luis nodded and found a broom. He thought: *This is why she should have a man around.* Luis didn’t like the idea of Eliza being alone at night. She had her guests, but they were customers, not guards. She didn’t even have a dog. Anything could happen. Why didn’t one of her sons come stay with her, at least?

“How long will it take you to make the bars?”

“I can do it today. Probably do it in the afternoon, when it’s raining.” Luis cut the grass and maintain the trees in the morning, before the sun was hot and high. In the afternoon, when it rained, he could do things like sand the bar or build furniture in the garage.

“Whatever you think is best.”

“Doña Eliza, have you thought about calling the police?”

“For what? The thief didn’t even steal a fork. The police won’t do anything.”

“That’s true.”

“Don’t tell anyone, Luis. I don’t want to worry the guests. Hopefully he got scared off and won’t come back. And hopefully he doesn’t know how far back the property goes.”

When Eliza and her then-husband Manuel had bought the property, she had been barely thirty, with two young sons, who, since they were raised in the United States, didn’t speak any Spanish. There had only been the big house and a swamp. The big house had a patio all the way around and a broken, hourglass-shaped pool. Together, Manuel and Eliza fixed it up, got the bats out of the walls and the *zorros* off the roof, and cut down the trees that were growing into the

pool. Pancho, her eldest son, picked up Spanish quickly. The family split their time between New York and Costa Rica until Eliza discovered Manuel's raging infidelities. By then, her sons were teenagers. She stayed for a few more years until they were eighteen and twenty. They were men then, and she felt like she had fulfilled whatever maternal obligation she had.

During their bitter divorce, they split the property in half. Manuel built two square pools, a bar, and a restaurant on his side. He charged locals to use the pool and held parties in the restaurant. For a while, things went pretty well, but then Manuel started charging too much for simple meals and stopped people from bringing in their own food. He started to gear the place towards Americans, and Americans weren't willing to go to central Costa Rica for food and a pool, especially not with all those hotels right by the beach. His business dwindled and, for reasons Eliza and her sons did not understand, Manuel decided to build a giant brick wall to divide his property from hers. The wall was built sloppily and cost thousands of dollars. Manuel ran out of money before he could finish. The sons laughed and nicknamed it "The Berlin Wall," but deep down, the divorce hurt them.

While Manuel sank money into his failing business, Eliza put up thin walls in her big house to make private rooms with their own entrances. She left herself a kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom. She put an ad in *The Tico Times* and *La Nacion* and gathered her first couple of visitors. Some of her first visitors kept coming back, especially Sweater Vest, who had been visiting Eliza's for about twenty years.

When Manuel put up the wall, Eliza planted vines to grow alongside it. Her side, which was still mainly undeveloped, looked like an intriguing secret garden. Even when Manuel tried to sell his side, potential buyers would try to peek over.

“And what’s over there? Who owns that side? Are they selling?”

Manuel asked the eldest son Pancho to take over his side so he could go back to his HVAC business in Long Island. Pancho did better for a while, but like his father, he focused too much on attracting Americans. After five years, they closed the bar and restaurant.

Then, Eliza’s younger son Lalo wanted to reopen the restaurant as a pizza parlor. Pizza was popular in Costa Rica, and Lalo learned the skill from a successful pizza place in Long Island. Manuel was going to take over the HVAC business, and that would free Lalo to come down to Costa Rica. Lalo, who was talented in HVAC but very disinterested in remaining a technician, couldn’t wait to come down. But a bitter divorce kept Lalo from leaving. He had a young son, Cesar, with his high school sweetheart. She would not let them go and used Cesar as an anchor.

By then, it was the late nineties. Time kept passing. Manuel’s side sat empty, unused. Pancho moved to Florida and started a family of his own. Manuel got remarried to a thirty-year-old who was pregnant with his third child. Before he remarried, he signed the HVAC business over to Lalo and his property in Costa Rica over to Pancho. It was, Eliza had to admit, the smartest business decision he had ever made on his own.

Pancho decided to “sell” his side to his mother and join the properties back together. Her business, at this point, was doing well, and she had built five small studio villas, which she would call the “standards.” After a few years, she built a few one-bedroom and two-bedroom houses. She still had a lot of virgin land—there was the haunted rock that she refused to move, so she couldn’t build there, and the grove of mango trees. Americans loved them and they served as

a small amount of secondary income, so she left that half of her land undeveloped. Unlike Manuel, Eliza made small decisions. He had already used all of his land for the restaurant, the bar, and the two large pools.

Pancho signed his land over to Eliza. Eliza gave her payments directly to Manuel, since the family respected the land as his. Manuel's new wife was upset with this outcome, since she had expected to marry a wealthy landowner and had turned up with nothing. What's worse, she discovered Manuel's tendency to sleep with other women, and Manuel insisted on coming by Eliza's with fruits and gifts. The fact that Manuel was still obviously in love with his ex-wife infuriated Eugenia. She started frying all his meals in an attempt to hasten his death.

Eliza tore down the wall separating her property from Manuel's. She let her visitors use the two pools, and rented out the bar and dance floor to anyone who wanted to throw a party. She kept the liquor license and let people from the street drink there. She reduced Manuel's complicated menu to burgers, fries, and salad. If someone wanted to throw a party, they could hire a caterer.

Her new business model worked better. She didn't have any one kind of visitor—She got Canadians, Europeans, Americans, retired people, families, folks who were having houses built in Costa Rica and needed a long-term place to stay, or Costa Ricans who worked in San Jose. They usually wanted something quiet, something different from the beachfront resorts and expensive hotels.

Luis finished sweeping and ran to throw away the glass and begin mowing the lawn. He always ran everywhere. Luis was a relatively new hire, but he did a fantastic job. Luis was about

thirty-five and could do just about anything: he worked with metal, built furniture, maintained the grounds, he could train and kill animals. He could fix a car, a toilet, a sick chicken. He knew how to smoke out wasps and make his own pesticide to kill ants. Luis didn't deal with electricity, but Eliza could understand that. He had black hair, a smiling, almost boyish face, large rough hands, and the waist of a ten-year-old boy. His skin was the color of roasted coffee, and he often wrapped an old t-shirt around his head when he was cutting grass or spraying chemical. When he took his shirt off, Eliza could see what looked like two bullet wounds in his back. Eliza knew he had come from Nicaragua during the civil war, but she didn't ask any questions about his past.

He was the best hire she had had in a while. Until last month, there had been three gardeners: Luis, Carlos, and Sergio. Carlos was good but old, and he kept injuring a knee here, a hand there. Finally, he had broken his foot by falling off a roof while trying to adjust an antenna. He lived with his daughter in San Jose now, and was more or less content with his forced retirement.

Sergio was too slow and took too many breaks. He disappeared and claimed to do some task that, upon inspection, had remained undone. You could tell that he thought with his pants and not his head. Then, Doña Eliza caught him stealing steaks from the kitchen. That was it for him—She had even changed the locks to the bar and the kitchen just in case. Sometimes disgruntled employees wanted revenge.

Maybe he was the one who broke in last night, Eliza thought. But no, that didn't make sense. Sergio would have known that that was her simple kitchen, and that there was nothing worth stealing there.

Luis was a good worker. Fast, honest, and kind. He did not hit on the pretty girls, did not fold napkins into birds and leave them on their doorsteps, did not cut flowers from the road and try to put them in their hair. Doña Eliza knew that while American girls might smile at boys who did that, it made them feel watched and uncomfortable.

Eliza checked her calendar. A new guest, an American named Richard, would be coming soon. She knew from experience that American men usually wanted a maid. At lunch, she would ask Luis if he knew anyone who would make a good maid. She trusted his judgment.

Luis finished mowing the lawn by the mango groves. He hoped it wouldn't rain too hard. When it did, he had to make sure no mud slid into the large square pools. This usually consisted of piling sandbags to divert the mud. If any mud got into the pools, it was a pain to clean. If that happened, he wouldn't have time to make bars for Eliza's windows today.

He headed up to the main house for lunch. Eliza had a communal kitchen area where he could put his lunch, or where people who stayed in the private rooms could put food. Most people rented out the houses now, so hardly anyone used the big kitchen. Luis used the back for storage: extra refrigerators, stoves, and a couple of toilets.

Luis found that Eliza had made soup, which he happily accepted over his leftover chicken.

“Luis, I have a question. Do you know anyone who might be a good maid?”

“I think I do. Yes, I know a lady. She's very nice.” He slurped some broth. “Very sad, though, her husband and son were killed in an accident a long time ago. Now she just has a daughter, who was a baby when it happened.”

“How did they die?”

“The family is from Nicaragua, and when they came, they lived in one of those shantytowns, you know. No plumbing, no electricity, houses made from just a bunch of metal parts leaning on each other. They lived under a bridge. During a storm, there was a landslide, and it killed *a lot* of people.” Eliza nodded and Luis bit into a piece of potato, which was hotter than he expected, and he winced. Eliza had seen him do that every time he ate her soup. He never seemed to learn that potatoes were always much hotter. “She’s a great worker though. Really, she just wants a better life for her and her daughter.”

“Yes, of course. Well if she would be interested, maybe you could bring her around one day.”

“Sure. I’ll ask her.” Luis bit into a carrot cautiously, found it to be cooler, and chewed it like a squirrel.

“It’s going to rain early today,” Eliza said.

“Yes, I think so, too.”

They ate and it began to pour. The *chicharas* didn’t even have a chance to sing before the rain. They usually made their funny sounds around noon and six.

Eliza did the dishes and Luis started forging the bars. He made one and found he didn’t have enough metal to continue. He waited for it to cool off so he could paint it and show Eliza. He was sure she would be fine with how it looked.

Since Luis couldn’t work outside in the rain, he went down to the bar and started to sand it. It needed to be revarnished. There had been American pennies embedded into the bar once,

but they'd either been picked out or worn down by sanding. Sometimes he could see the outline of a presidential head.

Eliza counted money and decided how much she had to get from the bank to pay Luis and, possibly, for the new maid. She would have to go tomorrow.

Who owed her? Those girls would have to pay her soon if they wanted to stay another month. It was almost June already. They didn't give a date for when they would leave. The brown-haired one was good about paying, but the blonde had a tendency to "forget" things. When it came to paying bills, forgetting was never really forgetting.

She counted on her fingers—One, two...yes, those girls would have to go out of the country soon. Foreigners were only allowed to stay in Costa Rica for three months, and then they had to leave the country for a few days. They could take a bus to Nicaragua or Panama, which was what most people did. Either way, they were running out of time. They had already been in Costa Rica for at least two months.

Chapter 2: Price of Paradise

Clara smoked in the shallow pool as *Lana del Rey* poured from her phone. She shaded her eyes. She liked the shallow pool because she could lay out, half in the sun, half in the water, and not get her hair wet. She had black eyeliner smeared under her eyes from who-knows-when, and while she never bothered to fix it, she did apply more, so she looked permanently hung over. She liked that.

Her phone would probably get too hot to play music. That happened sometimes. Sarah looked at her phone and took another drag. She wished the Internet reached down here. It was strong up by the big house and the hourglass pool, but she would have liked to watch Netflix in the square pool.

Suzie swam laps in the deeper pool. Her one-piece racing suit had become transparent from sitting out on the clothesline to dry, so now she used a black sports bra and dark boy shorts to swim.

Luis started up his lawn mower and began to cut the grass around the pool. Clara watched Luis mow back and forth and back. The property covered ten acres. He had a lot to do.

“Do you think it’s zen-like for him?” She asked Suzie once she’d finished her laps. “Do you think he like, meditates as he’s working?”

Suzie made a face. “I don’t know if he thinks about it like that. It’s his job.” Suzie pulled off her swimming goggles. They hadn’t snapped yet. She had taken care of them by saturating them with baby oil after each swim.

The sun was high in the sky. *It must be almost eleven*, Suzie thought. She had olive skin, but she developed moles quickly. She had one on each elbow, one on her wrist, and the one by her upper lip was starting to grow.

Clara dropped her cigarette into the pool. “I wish he wasn’t so loud,” she laughed. Months of swimming had also faded Clara’s bikinis, so now she wore lace bras and thongs in the pool. The hair on her body had turned blonde, so she stopped shaving.

Clara and Suzie didn’t know what happened to the other gardeners. Luis was very serious and didn’t talk to them often. Clara liked making him pick coconuts so she could watch his thin body slide up a palm tree, but he was nowhere near as good looking as Sergio.

They had liked Sergio because he was young and gorgeous—twenty-nothing with abs and glowing green eyes, a cocked half-smile, sharp teeth and wide shoulders. Clara had made love to him several times and had offered him to Suzie, but she was content to watch him clean the pool. She stayed out of the studio and took her laptop to the pool by the main or sat at the bar while they were together. She had once been drunk enough to watch, out of curiosity, but Sergio was too eager to get her involved.

Clara messaged her friends about the hot Latin affair and sent photos to her giggling girlfriends. Then, one day, she convinced herself that she was pregnant with his child. She wasn’t, but her panic sustained her and killed her boredom until her period came.

Clara had been at a yoga retreat in the jungle prior to staying at Doña Eliza’s. She vomited salt water at dawn with the rest of the *yogis*, she went to the bathroom in a hole and

didn't use modern plumbing or electricity. She had stayed there for several months before coming to Doña Eliza's retreat. She had yet to see San José, or any Costa Rican city, for that matter, so despite having been in the country for five months, she still believed that Costa Rica was a relatively simple country with limited access to Internet and McDonald's. She had taken to watching true crime shows on Eliza's English cable channels—Shows about women who finally murdered their husbands, or stalkers who hunted ballerinas and classical musicians and dumped their raped bodies down elevator shafts.

This was not Suzie's first time in Costa Rica. Her grandfather was Costa Rican, and she had visited his house when she was a little girl. He had lived in Heredia until his death five years ago.

Suzie was a little more familiar with how things worked here, but her Spanish was limited. She knew that all the gardeners at this resort had probably been Nicaraguan. Nicaraguans had rounder faces and darker skin than Costa Ricans, and usually ended up as gardeners or maids. A lot of them were illegal. They lived in houses like tin cans under bridges or on the side of a mountain—undesirable property due to the landslides during the rainy season. Her grandfather had a Nicaraguan maid until he had caught her stealing drops of lotions and creams. She had been taking a pump here and there and putting them in little baggies or between folds of aluminum foil. That was it—then she had been fired. A week later, he had a new maid.

Suzie and Clara gone to NYU together, and they decided to travel over the summer before applying to graduate school. Neither wanted to continue their education, but they both had to keep their student debt at bay.

Suzie had paid for college by herself. She had taken out loans, but only for two years since she had started out at a community college and transferred into NYU. Clara, positive that someone in New York would recognize her as a stunner and take care of her needs, plunged into a beautiful studio apartment in Hell's Kitchen, then, somehow, into a condo. She could find men willing to pay her rent and mortgage (especially if they were married, because they had to secure a love nest), but not her education. They encouraged her to drop out and model instead. Clara had modeled a bit on the side, but found that the money wasn't all that great, and most of modeling was about attending parties, not eating, and taking selfies and drugs.

First, she had to get rid of her condo. The men who had previously talked about the importance of love and passion were now talking about how their wives were great partners, and how, in the end, they had to secure their lives, work on their relationships, and spend time with their families. They told her that she did not understand because she was so young. Clara did understand, though. What's hard to understand about being used?

Suzie found a job answering emails for a website. To afford rent, she had to live in the worst neighborhood within the range of the subway, a two-bedroom in East New York. Her first week there, an unarmed teenager was shot and killed by the NYPD just two blocks away. She wrestled home through riots and protests for a month.

Suzie's life was less glamorous than Clara's. It always had been. She made a large pot of rice and lentils at the beginning of each week, which she ate until it was gone or until it became an inedible, simultaneously soggy and crunchy slop. On Friday, she would order takeout. She walked to the park on the weekends, but she didn't have money to do anything she wanted to do, and she wasn't pretty or thin enough to lasso a wealthy man.

Suzie wasn't ugly, but she had never considered herself beautiful. She had a round face, a flat nose. She was average height with mousy brown hair that flipped out when it was too short and became stringy when it was too long. When she was with Clara, she saw the attention men gave her. They were always sending her drinks, offering smokes.

Six months after graduation, her student loan bills started coming in. Suzie took on a second job giving tours on those red double-decker buses: rain, shine or freezing cold. She started reciting her tour lines in her sleep. That's when she decided to stop paying for her student loans, and she started saving that money for a trip to Costa Rica.

Clara wanted to come, too, but she wanted to either go into the jungle or to an all-inclusive resort. For Suzie, both of those were problematic—She could not afford either.

You would think that going into the jungle and living without plumbing would be cheap, Suzie thought, *but people will spend thousands to shit in a hole in the woods.*

So they settled on this retreat instead. Suzie had been there longer since Clara had that stint with the *yogis*. Clara bunked in Suzie's studio, and they split the rent.

Doña Eliza had chickens, three pools, and small studio houses for half of what Suzie paid in New York. They deferred their loans on the basis that they had no jobs. Secretly, they both hoped that no one in the United States would pay their loans back, and then the system would collapse, and everyone's debt would be forgiven.

Paradise had its own problems: Suzie and Clara's pool of money was running low. Clara didn't want to admit this, and she compensated by swiping her credit card. She didn't know how close to her limit she was, and she treated her card like a magic gem that she could wave and suddenly, she'd have art supplies, food, or a cash advance.

Suzie didn't have a credit card and started doing freelance work online. Mainly, she wrote book reviews for self-published books. They were terrible, all of them. Some were romances—stories about monsters from one comic book fucking a monster from another comic book, or bestiality, or airplanes fucking bears, or whatever such thing. “Pick any two objects and write a story about them fucking” seemed to be the only rule.

One story was about a woman who got off by sitting on a little boy's face in the back of a public bus. At the end of the “book,” the protagonist killed the boy with her thighs. After she posted her review, the author asked Suzie if she wanted to ghostwrite more chapters.

“After reading your review, I think you really get what it's about. I can send you some photos of the protagonist in fishnets . . . ”

Suzie politely declined.

Her parents did not understand her decision to go to Costa Rica. Suzie could feel their disappointment, but they didn't really understand. She could work two jobs, take unpaid internships to nowhere, and eat her lentil gruel for the next decade. No one wanted to pay her for the work she wanted to do, but seemed to think she should do it for free.

Her family's disappointment had paralyzed her at first, and she had almost considered going back and begging for her old job. She resisted, and beyond the initial panic, she found that ignoring her student loan debt felt great. She didn't pay taxes on her freelance work.

Clara, unlike Suzie, she did want fancy things. She wanted to shop at *Whole Foods*, to visit those hotels nestled in the mountains and lounge in the infinity pools, to get massages with exotic oils and make love to mixed-race natives with dark skin and light eyes. She had no shortage of marriage proposals from wealthy old men and stable, appropriately-aged military

men. She was seriously considering becoming an army wife. It would mean a good income, and her husband would receive benefits for being married.

But she didn't have to decide that now. They reached their studio, rinsed the chlorine off their bodies. Clara was careful not to get her bouncy curls wet. They threw on loose dresses and sandals and walked towards the local *super*.

The girls made it back to Eliza's with *Bamboo* and chips just as the rain started. They had walked to the town square, the soccer field by the bus stop, where everyone was gossiping. Using a combination of Suzie's broken Spanish and the locals' English, the girls found out that there was a scandal in Turrucares, the town next to Eliza's. A prostitute, either Nicaraguan or Panamanian (everyone was very insistent that she was *not* Costa Rican) had seduced and lived with an older Swedish man. He did all of his business in Europe, but moved the money over to Costa Rica to avoid paying taxes.

The story, more or less, was that he had come back to his home in Turrucares, but the doors had been locked and his keys no longer fit. The woman said that he had been drunk and high, the man said that she had been in the company of other men. He could hear them breathing and smell their lovemaking from outside.

He stayed in a nearby hotel until they could work out their problems. The hotel maid found the man's body in the bathtub, wrists slit. The Costa Rican air had a way of tightening around the heart and squeezing passion out of even the driest prunes.

Some said the man was stupid for falling in love with a woman who was obviously using him. Some felt sorry for the broken-hearted old man who had been seduced by a vixen. The

woman in this situation, while she couldn't claim much of his money, came out of the ordeal with his truck.

The girls took their bags of alcohol and junk food and walked home. They closed the gate behind them and heard thunder. Suzie grabbed her laptop and Clara picked some leftover magazines from the kitchen area, and they went down to the bar to drink and eat. They noticed a part of it had been recently sanded, and sat on the finished side.

“He deserved it. Why does any old man think a beautiful woman wants to get with him? I mean, it was clearly for money.” Clara had memories of living life easy, of a time when her only job was to be pretty. Of course, she had to keep everything hairless, her roots touched up, her body tight. She had to play second fiddle to a serious girlfriend or a wife (they were always less pretty, yet held in higher esteem). Her dates would constantly have to excuse themselves to talk to their *real* women, and then the waiters and the bartenders would avoid making eye contact with Clara as she sat alone and beautiful. Clara was forgetting that part of it, and was thinking only about the moment the check came and she could sit back as her date threw a black card at everything.

The girls were sitting at the large, empty bar. Suzie was trying to get Internet signal. She could go up to the big house for better signal, but it seemed so far away, and the rain drops were heavy.

Clara scrolled through an old copy of *Fast Company* that had been left by the judge when he came last week. He had come with his daughter, and they stayed in a two-bedroom near near the bar. The men in the magazine were wealthy but not entirely old or repulsive.

“Would you fuck him?” Clara asked Suzie. Suzie looked over at a face she didn’t know, some man in jeans and a t-shirt with his arms folded and a half-smile.

“I mean, for money? No. I don’t think so.” Suzie was reading a book about werewolves fucking an army of Frankenstein’s monsters. The author kept calling them “Frankensteins” instead of “Frankenstein’s monsters.” The minor error aggravated her. She had the feeling that this novelist had never read Shelley’s original.

Clara kept flipping. She could meet one of these men at a conference, maybe. There had to be events where rich entrepreneurs liked to hang out. She could be a cocktail waitress, or pretend to be an entrepreneur herself. These days, rich people hung out in jeans and shirts from *The Gap*. There was no way to look at someone and tell if they were rich. Maybe she could have an idea for one of them to build. An app for models. An app for pretty people to filter out ugly people. Why hadn’t anyone done that before?

Suzie paused to look at Clara. “If you could make a million dollars doing anything, absolutely anything, what would it be?”

“Make a million dollars? Someone should just give it to me. I deserve it.”

A mango landed on the roof, a sound like a bowling ball colliding with bone. They winced.

“Maybe I could learn how to code,” Suzie said. “The women at my old job, they could make a lot of money if they could code. They got scholarships, job offers on *LinkedIn* like, all the time.” She remembered one woman who hadn’t even gone to college. She was thin, allergic to everything, and sat on a yoga ball instead of a desk chair. She had no debt and her starting

salary was a clean 80,000 a year. Suzie had graduated from NYU and her starting salary had been 32,000.

“Code? What do you mean?”

“Like writing code. Making apps for phones, front end stuff...” Clara wasn’t listening. She was flipping through rich men, trying to find one who was wealthy but not too old, attractive but also single (so not *too* attractive). It wasn’t good for business if the man was just as pretty as she was.

Clara pulled the clip out of her hair and started twisting her blonde ringlets around her fingers. Suzie knew that when Clara did that, she was deep in thought.

Suzie wrote her review under her pseudonym Lilith Black. Lilith Black sounded like the kind of woman who would read and review, but not write, romance novels:

“*Werewolves Fuck Frankensteins* delivers exactly what it promises. While it’s short, this is a fun (and deliciously sexy!) book chronicles through the feelings of loneliness both groups undoubtedly feel. Werewolves, who are more comfortable with their carnality, help the inexperienced Frankenstein’s monsters to use and discover their bodies. If you’re into the student-teacher dynamic, this is a great read. Following the monsters through their deflowering feels almost like reliving your own first time! I would definitely recommend this book for anyone interested in monster erotica!”

Suzie scowled at her own overuse of exclamation points and the way she had passively aggressively used “Frankenstein’s monsters” instead of “Frankenstein.”

An iguana scratched the top of the bar. Both girls held their breaths. Everything made a sound. Everything moved. Everything was doing something. Then the rain unzipped from the

sky. A thousand glass marbles hit the pavement at once; Suzie could almost feel them hitting her teeth.

Chapter 3:

It was the next morning. Luis had fixed a bar onto her kitchen window before he left, and he had promised more were on the way.

Eliza could tell it was going to rain early. It wasn't hot out, just muggy. She still had leftover soup from yesterday, and she'd have that for lunch and dinner. She could give some more to Luis. She liked to eat with him, or give him coffee and cookies before he had to take his bus back into Alajuela.

Cooking for one was hard, and Eliza often didn't feel like doing it, but a recent trip to the doctor insisted that she need to cut down on her bread and sugar intake. She was at risk for diabetes. So Eliza began cooking more again, the way she did when she had a husband and young sons. Cooking for Luis was a good excuse to cook more; cooking for one was so sad. She remembered once the divorce was finalized—She had grown accustomed to buying large amounts of milk, of fruit and meat, and then found she didn't need any of it.

The doctor had given her a list of foods she could and could not eat. Eliza was accustomed to having *Chiky* cookies (cookie on one side, chocolate on the other) with her afternoon coffee, but cookies were certainly not on the approved list. She traded her chocolate cookies for oatmeal. Simultaneously, she had also developed an allergy to mangos. Her lips would swell if mango skin even touched them. Eliza had a mountain of mangos she could not eat.

Eliza took her shower, ate some eggs and beans, and got ready to go to the bank. She needed to take some money out for Luis, and exchange *colones* to dollars. It was almost eight. *I should leave soon, so I don't have to wait there forever.*

Eliza heard a tap on her front door. Francisco, the engineer, stood in the doorway. He had black hair and sharp white teeth. His family lived in Turrialba but his work was in Alajuela. He spent the week at Eliza's because it was closer to work, and left on the weekends to see his family. Eliza didn't think he was married, but he was the proper age. She checked his hand out of curiosity—no ring, just even, tan skin. He was tall for a Costa Rican, and his eyes squinted tight when he smiled.

“Doña Eliza, I wanted to pay you for June.”

“Sure, Francisco. Come on in! Do you want coffee?” Eliza checked. She still had some time.

“No, I have to go to work. I just wanted to give you money for June.”

“Of course.” He handed Eliza a series of bright blue bills. It was all there.

“Is someone new here? I saw two girls swimming yesterday?”

“The girls are friends. They're here together. I think they just graduated from college. You know, they've been here a while. Almost three months. I'm surprised you haven't seen them before.”

“Maybe because I'm always at work. Are they American?”

“Oh, yeah. They know a little bit of Spanish, if you want to try to talk to them. The blonde one is named Clara—”

“And the other?” His voice up even higher.

“Suzie.”

“What a strange name, no?”

“I think it’s short for ‘Susanna.’”

“Ah, that makes sense. Susanna is a nice name.”

“Do you want a receipt for June, Francisco?” Eliza wanted to wrap the conversation up.

“No, no. Thank you! I have to get going anyway.”

He left. Eliza left her front door open a crack. As she put her tin can of beans back in the refrigerator, Eliza heard a honk. A large black truck had pulled up to the gate. The driver held out his printed email confirmation. Pancho had booked him; he took care of Eliza’s online reservations.

“Oh Hi, Richard! I thought you weren’t coming until later?”

“Caught an earlier flight.” He smiled. He wore large aviators. Eliza saw her reflection in them, saw the way her eyelids drooped, the beginnings of a double chin.

She opened the gate and led the truck to his two-bedroom. She give him his keys and showed him number nine, a two-bedroom just outside wifi range. He scowled when she told him that.

“I was told this place had wifi. I have a lot of work to do.” He pulled his sunglasses off to reveal cloudy blue eyes.

“If you go by the main house, by the hourglass pool, you can get Internet.”

“But I have to go all the way up there.”

He is not thin enough to complain about a little walking, Eliza thought to herself. It would do him some good.

Eliza's first impression was that Richard dressed too young for a man his age, but that was how people in the States operated. They placed acting young above everything else. Maybe Eliza was just old-fashioned. She had recently stepped into a mall and recognized clothes that she used to wear, fashions that had come back around to being fashionable (it only took twenty years or so for that to happen), and realized that it was not the clothes that had changed, but her.

Richard pulled out a tablet and started walking around to see where he could get Internet signal.

Is he not even going to unpack? Richard's bags were still in his large truck.

"So Richard, what are you doing in Costa Rica?"

"I've been here before. I come every year to do business."

Eliza had to get to the bank. She did not particularly care what kind of business this man worked in. According to Pancho's confirmation email, he had paid in full and the money had been wired to her account. She could check to see if it went through while she was in Alajuela.

A lawn mower started in the distance. Richard looked up for a moment, and then back down towards his little machine.

"I have to go to the bank, but make yourself right at home! You have the key?"

He did. Eliza went back to the main house and locked the front door. She probably wouldn't get back until noon. She hated making line at the bank.

Luis spent the morning mowing the lawn, trimming trees, and collecting branches into a pile. He would have to burn them tomorrow—there was too much mugginess and wetness in the air for anything to burn today.

Eliza came back from the bank around noon and warmed up yesterday's soup. She placed two bowls on her kitchen table. Luis took his shoes off and left them by the front door and pulled off his gloves. He looked out the window and was reminded that he needed to buy more metal to bar up the windows. Eliza had given him the go-ahead to add bars to all the windows in all the villas so long as they looked nice.

They ate; Luis bit into a potato chunk and scrunched his nose in discomfort.

"How are you doing, Luis?"

"Well, thank God! How's everything?"

"Good. A *gringo* came today. He's staying for a few months."

"Yes, I saw his truck. Nice truck." Eliza fixed Luis a cup of coffee. He liked his without sugar and with a small touch of milk. Luis thought milk in itself was almost overwhelmingly sweet. Eliza wished she had his preference for savory over sweet. She thought about the long tube stemming from her arm, her sweet blood filling vials in the doctor's office. "Estrella said she would come tomorrow. She's interested in working here."

"Oh? Good. I can get some money for her, too."

"I had to convince her that you were not Manuel's wife."

"Why?"

"Manuel's wife has a reputation for . . . not being very nice to *Nicas*. The restaurant they opened next door? Do you remember?" Eliza nodded. "Manuel's wife Eugenia kept saying to the cook . . . how she was so ugly and dark-skinned and lazy. Because she's Nicaraguan. One day, the cook lost her mind. She went crazy, took a knife from the kitchen and chased Eugenia right out of the restaurant."

“Really?” Eliza had heard this story before, but it changed every time. In some versions, the cook drew blood. In other versions, she just chased Eugenia around and screamed. It was interesting to hear how stories changed.

“Yes, but once I said no, you’re Manuel’s *ex*, then she was fine.”

“Good. Luis, stop biting into the potatoes. They’re too hot.”

“How’s the American?”

“Seems fine. He paid. I checked at the bank. Everything looks good.”

There was a pause.

“Eliza, Manuel asked me to work for him on Sundays. I like working here, and—”

“Sunday is your day off. You do with it what you want to do with it.”

“It won’t bother you if I’m working for Manuel?”

“No, Luis. It’s your day off.” It did bother her. Of all the gardeners in Costa Rica, Manuel had to recruit *hers*? That wasn’t Luis’s fault, though. She couldn’t punish him for wanting to make some extra money. She paid him well, though, so she was surprised.

“I wouldn’t normally, but it’s my wife. She hasn’t been feeling well.”

“Oh?”

“I think it’s cancer.”

Eliza put down her spoon and touched his arm.

“Cancer?! Have you seen a doctor?”

“Not yet. And I don’t know for sure. We haven’t seen anyone about it, but it’s just this feeling. It’s this feeling I have.” He took a few more bites and found the soup had cooled. “My mother died of cancer. Back home.”

Eliza nodded. Luis didn't say anything else about it. They ate in silence and watched the trees grow darker and then brighter as the sun danced behind clouds.

"Today is ugly," Luis observed as Eliza took their empty plates and washed the dishes.

Around eight, a black Range Rover pulled into a concrete path near the bar and stopped. Clara, who was never awake that early, watched from her window as it rolled over a red and orange mango. Clara expected it to pop, to blow up, but since it had already been ripe and bruised, a slit anti-climactically tore through it, and puree goo slipped out.

Then she saw Eliza giving a pair of keys to a much older, slightly pudgy but very American-looking man. He wore pale jeans and had an obvious beer belly and a flat, long backside, but he didn't look awful for whatever his age was. He had a long, white ponytail and a silver and black watch.

Clara nudged Suzie awake and suggested they go to the bar and read. Suzie rolled her eyes but obliged. They made it halfway down the path before the newcomer called out to them.

"Pura Vida!" He said in a bad, almost ironically bad, American accent. "I'm Richard. Do you speak English?"

"Yes," Clara laughed. "I'm Clara. This is Suzie. We're from New York."

"Oh, city gals! I'd better watch out!" He gave them a wink as he pulled his luggage out of his truck. "I'm going to be here for a few months." Richard nodded his head towards number nine, a two-bedroom that faced the bar and the square pools.

"We're sharing a room by the big house," Clara showed him the good side of her face and flashed a smile.

“Nice to meet you! So do you know where I can get good signal?” Richard stopped rolling his luggage nodded towards the iPad on his patio table.

“Oh, usually by the main house. Although our house also has great range.”

“Oh, really?” Richard laughed. Clara and Suzie kept walking towards the bar.

“What’s up with you?” Suzie asked Clara once they were far enough away.

“What? Nothing. I was just saying hi.”

“You should stop reading through those magazines. They’re making you think a millionaire is going to just fall into your lap.”

“Well, why not?” Clara shook her head so her curls could catch the sun. Richard could be watching through a window. “It’s not hard. You just have to be in the right place at the right time.”

They sat at the bar. Suzie realized she had left her laptop up in the studio.

She wasn’t in a good mood. Clara had slept with the TV on—Something Suzie couldn’t stand. It gave her nightmares, especially since Clara liked to watch crime shows about rape or murder.

That, and she had to go to the bank to get June’s rent. The local store by the soccer field accepted cards, but they didn’t have an ATM, so she had to go into Alajuela for that.

“I’m going to Alajuela to go to the bank. Do you want to come?”

“No, I think I’m going to go swimming.”

She probably wants to walk up and down the path with her bra on, Suzie thought. She hasn’t even mentioned the rent.

Suzie walked up to the hourglass pool by the big house to look for the bus schedule. Eliza always kept a bus schedule on the bookshelf. A man was there—short, a little round in the middle, but not at all bad-looking.

“*Buenos dias,*” he said. Suzie nodded. “You are Susanna?”

Suzie raised her eyebrows. His accent was very thick. “Yes, but you can call me Suzie.” She paused a second, then said in her best Spanish, “*Si, me llamo Suzie.*”

“*Mucho gusto.* Nice meeting you. My name, Francisco.”

“*Mucho gusto.* Do you know...*Sabes...el horario...para el bus?*” She winced. She meant to ask where the piece of paper was, not whether or not he had memorized the bus schedule.

“For you to go where? To Alajuela, or San Jose?”

“Alajuela.”

“I work in Alajuela. Maybe, I go, I take you? Unless you have...unless you need...I go in fifteen minutes. My English so-so.”

He pointed to his watch.

“No! No. Your English is great.” Suzie felt like an American idiot. He was the one speaking English in Costa Rica, and he was the one apologizing. “It’s great. I appreciate it. *Muy amable.* I just need to get changed. *Bueno.*”

He smiled and she could see his teeth were white and straight, with two perfect fangs. She half-ran, half-skipped to the studio.

Suzie threw on her baggy jeans after some consideration—She usually only wore those when she felt fat, and did she want to look fat? Did she care what Francisco thought?

I’m thinking about this too much.

Clara wasn't in the studio. She thought she heard her laugh and a male voice. She was already with that man. Suzie checked the refrigerator and saw the Bamboo was gone.

She's drinking? It's barely eight in the morning.

Suzie didn't want to worry about that. She needed to get changed and go. She grabbed her purse and made sure she had enough change to get a bus ride back without breaking a large bill.

Then she locked the studio door, sighed, and let herself back in. She quickly changed into a tighter top, just to compensate for the baggy jeans, and locked the door again.

Clara was on Richard's porch. They were drinking. She was scrolling through her phone and showing Richard photos of herself playing with her baby cousins. "You're not bad with kids. As far as pretty girls go, you're pretty good." Clara was intrigued by the semi-compliment. She made sure her eyes were low and perpetually unimpressed. She kept scrolling through her phone and Richard finished his drink.

"So you get Internet in your house, Clara?"

"Yeah. Up by the big house, the signal is really good."

"Oh really? I don't get any signal here. Maybe we can go up to your place and hang out there? I need to check my email."

"Sure, but—" Clara was embarrassed. "Suzie and I share a room. It's not like, all mine."

"Oh, that's fine. I can go by the pool, I guess." They drank and laughed at the ways that Costa Rica was different from the United States. Then they laughed at the concrete tables and benches that were at every restaurant and park in Costa Rica.

“Like, nothing is made of wood here. Or even metal. It’s just a...fuckin’...slab of concrete in a circle and those three damn—”

“I know!” Clara practically vomited. “And I was so excited when I first saw them. I was like, this place is so cool with that sweet ass bench and table! And they’re *every-fuckin’-where!*”

They laughed without quite knowing what was so funny about a concrete bench and table. Clara turned rosy. Somewhere around their fourth Bamboo, they became serious. They both started to sweat. Clara didn’t other wiping the sweat from her forehead; Richard liked that. The clouds started in.

“You know, things have been hard since my wife died,” Clara listened. This was a good opportunity to show him how caring she could be. “You ever know someone who is just sick for no reason? They carry it inside them, in their genes almost, give their sickness to everyone around them . . .” He trailed off, his mind in space. He looked forward at the empty bar and restaurant.

“That sounds so hard.” Clara interrupted the spell. She could see that he was seeing his wife at the bar. Maybe she was smiling, or flirting. Whatever it was, she was still, somehow, taking attention away from her. “But she would want you to move on.”

“Aging is an illusion, you know.” Richard’s voice grew louder. “No one has to grow old. No one has to die. It’s a myth. If you take care of yourself, you can really live forever. I read this book . . .” Richard stopped.

“No, no, I get you. Age is just a number.”

“You know, my wife and I built this whole empire. We had airplanes, hotels...there was one time a hotel didn’t have room for us, so I just bought it. I just bought the damn hotel because

I didn't feel like driving and finding a new one. But since she died, I just...I didn't see the point. I like to donate my money to random causes. Sometimes I give someone money for college, to start their own business...it's just more fulfilling than owning a jet plane, you know?" Clara absolutely had to agree. A loud bug made a long screech. "And things are so terrible in the United States for young people. I don't know how anyone now could make it. If I was your age right now, there's no way I could do what I did. Make what I made, all by myself. For you guys to make it, you need a lot of help. It's *impossible* now." He looked out. The sun was growing hotter. An iguana sunbathed on the roof of the old kitchen. It turned its head side to side.

"I'm going to the beach this weekend. Do you want to come with me? I'm going to Jaco. It's not the nicest beach, and I'm definitely going to nicer ones later on in my trip, but it should be fun."

Clara crossed her legs. Then she noticed her light (but definitely bushy) leg hairs. She uncrossed them.

"I'll think about it. Maybe. Maybe. I'll let you know."

"All right. Well, I leave bright and early Saturday morning. Let me know tomorrow. I'd love to have some company." Richard put his hand on her shoulder and rubbed it like he was lathering soap. "Thanks for this. This was nice. I should unpack."

Clara left and went back to her room. Suzie wasn't there. She considered inviting Richard to her studio so he could use the Internet, then decided against it and took a nap instead. She remembered Sergio, the young gardener with green eyes, the way he would stop raking when she walked by. He didn't mind that she had a little bit of fat on her thighs; he'd pinch it every once in a while and wink, or tap on his cheek when he was leaving for the day (his way of asking for a

kiss). He had a smooth face—He was younger than her, for sure. Maybe eighteen, nineteen. She hadn't asked—She was almost afraid of the answer.

She remembered a strange game they'd play where she would pretend to sleep, and Sergio would throw his machete into the side of a nearby tree, tip-toe into her studio, kiss her legs, push her summer dress up, trace all her special places over her bra and panties, and on and on until he pulled her up to straddle him and she'd let out something like a laugh and something like a moan.

Riding with Francisco to Alajuela was awkward. Suzie wanted to talk, and he wanted to talk, but they didn't know what to say or how to say it (quite literally). So, with their limited vocabulary, the conversation ended up being simple, with statements like “Costa Rica is beautiful” and “Costa Rica is relaxing” and “I like Costa Rica.”

“Who do you think will win the *mundial*?”

“The what?”

“The game! The cup! The World Cup!”

Was he a sports fan? He hadn't seemed like the type.

“You like sports?”

“No, *pero*...it's the *mundial*! Everyone in here becomes to liking sports during the *mundial*!” Suzie laughed. Right, Latin American countries liked soccer a lot more than she was used to.

“Oh well...I guess I will have to say Costa Rica!”

“Yes! Is a good answer.” He smiled. Then they had reached the road by the airport and it was quiet again. Francisco turned on the radio. Smashing Pumpkins was on.

“Ah, Smashing Pumpkins, is very nice music.”

“Really? You like this band? But they’re so old!”

“No, but good music is good music. Is how I learn English, from music. My father say...why you listen when you don’t know? And I say, then I learn English! When I was teenager.”

Suzie laughed.

“Smashing Pumpkins is pretty good. I just don’t listen to them that often.”

“Yes and...you like The Cure?”

“Yes—”

“Good, good. And Guns N’ Roses?”

Francisco seemed to be stuck somewhere between 1988-1996. She wondered how old he was and suddenly became nervous. He could be, like, almost forty.

Suzie recognized the cemetery, that pile of white boxes on top of the ground. Costa Ricans didn’t put their dead in the ground for some reason. They were almost there.

He dropped her off in front of the central park. Suzie thanked him. He was nice enough, but probably a little too old for her. She wondered if she caught him looking at her shirt—he hadn’t.

Then it was just her and the walk to the bank. She didn’t know what was wrong with her. She didn’t know why she couldn’t return to the United States just yet. She’d heard that a lot of Americans taught English, and it would be easy for her to get work at a call center. Maybe she

would do that. Teaching English probably paid better, but she didn't have a certificate to teach, and the few places she had checked out required them.

The rent to Eliza worried her more. She did not, at this exact moment, have enough to cover both her share and Clara's, and she knew, just knew, that Clara didn't have it.

After lunch, Eliza called Pancho.

"The American came. Richard. I went to the bank and everything looks good. He's staying for two months?"

"Yup. He's been to Costa Rica a bunch of times before."

"What's his business in?"

"Not sure, but he acts like he has a ton of money. He's always investing in something. Last week, it was a new kind of wheelchair." Pancho paused. "So, how's dad?"

"How am I supposed to know what your father does?"

"Just asking, Ma."

"All I know is he's going to New York in June. He's going to visit Lalo. You know how he doesn't like the rainy season."

Pancho paused; Eliza recognized that he was taking a drag out of a cigarette. She hated that he smoked.

"Ma, I had a question. You have a gardener, right?"

"I have Luis. He's better than a gardener."

“Does he need any help? I have this friend—” Pancho always had a friend. “He’s a nice guy. Was messed up on drugs for a while. He’s doing better now, though, really. Do you think you have any work for him? Help him out?”

“Absolutely not. I have nothing for him to do, and no money to pay him with. And what happens when he starts taking drugs again? And what, he would just stay in one of my houses? That means I can’t rent it.”

“I know, but is there something you can do, Ma? Something he can do?”

“I’m sorry, Pancho, but there’s nothing here he would want to do. Americans just aren’t good at the kind of work that needs to be done around here. He would need to learn everything.”

Pancho let it go. She could tell he was disappointed.

“So who else is there? Who else is coming?”

“There’s the judge and his daughter. She’s so cute, Pancho. They’re black, and she has these curls . . . they’re the tightest curls. She’s so, so pretty. About ten, I think. Nine. I just feel bad because there’s no one her age to play with, and the judge never lets her out of his sight. Says he’s seen too many terrible things. Richard is here now, he’s in number nine. Two girls are sharing a standard, and Francisco is in a standard. Sweater Vest is coming in a couple of weeks —”

“Sweater Vest? Ma, the guy is a drunk. Do you remember what happened the last time he was there?”

Pancho was referencing the time Sweater Vest had injured his foot and hadn’t told anyone for days. Finally they found him drunk and stumbling—his foot too swollen for any shoe, with a black and white hole in it.

“He’s been coming since I opened. You can’t say no to your most loyal customers, Pancho. In this business, everyone is a little crazy. But crazy and paying is better than crazy and not paying.”

“I guess. We just need to make the place nicer. Then we can charge more, and guys like Sweater Vest will find somewhere else.”

He sounded like Manuel when he spoke like that.

“We’ll see. One step at a time. Thank you for your help in bringing Richard here, though. I appreciate it.” She heard a honk at the gate and the growl of a diesel engine. “I have to go. I think your father is here.”

Eliza hung up and walked outside. She sighed when she saw the nose of his truck. He hadn’t called. He had just pulled up to the locked gate and started honking.

Eliza opened the gate for him and he pulled in. She made sure not to close the gate, this way he could pull out easily. She said a quick prayer to God—*Please don’t let him turn off his truck*—but he did.

“This is for the good old days,” he said. He held a bag out the window. Eliza nodded and accepted the bounty: Pineapples and *momones*. Manuel knew she loved those. He had taken care not to buy any mangos or guava, since she already had those growing on the property. “You know, I hired your gardener to come by every once in a while. Just on Sundays, to pick up.”

“I heard. Luis is very good. He’ll do a great job, I’m sure.”

“So how are things here? How’s business?” Manuel was talking to her through the window. He probably expected Eliza to invite him in for cookies and coffee.

“Pretty much the same.”

Manuel nodded with his thinking face, the kind of frown that looked like a half moon. He stretched his neck to get a look around. Eliza wanted him to go.

“Well, I have some people coming to look at the place, so I’m going to have to clean up before they get here.”

“Oh really? Looking to buy the whole place?”

“No, no. To rent a room. I have to clean the room.”

Manuel’s hand rested outside his window. He liked to touch things. To own things. To carve his name and initials into things. When he was younger, he had a gold chain with his first name on it. He still wanted to own this place, to know which cars were coming in and out, who the maids were, where they were from, who was American, who wasn’t. And, most importantly, he wanted to own Eliza.

His hands, once soft and even, had cracked. Eliza could see his ashy knuckles and crocodile complexion. Even his face had the same look of a snake about to shed its skin—a used and cloudy film. His eyelids sagged. Manuel’s sons often begged Eliza to take their father back. But what was there to take back? He had another wife, another child. He was old and unfaithful.

“So,” continued Eliza. “I have to go. Thank you for the fruit.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, I’ll be all right. I’ll lock the gate.”

There was nothing left for Manuel to do but turn his tank around and crunch down the path. Eliza watched him leave, then locked the gate.

The sun was going down. *Chicharras* clicked. She heard a woodpecker. Eliza decided to take a walk or two around the property and maybe fold some towels before going to bed.

Chapter 4: Employee Relations

The new maid was named Estrella. She brought her daughter Esperanza with her on her first day. The girl didn't have school that Friday, or maybe she did but didn't want to go—Either way, she was going to help her mother clean.

Estrella had snake hips and a fat belly. She wore a skintight shirt and her fat poked out of her bra. Her hair was curly and black.

Esperanza looked like her mother except she was stick-thin. She wore a lot of makeup to make up for her small breasts and flat backside. The girl was maybe twelve. Her hips hadn't yet spread, and the men who saw her waited for that quick, Lolita span of time when her hips would be wide and her legs would still be thin, that precious time before a woman turned, say, twenty.

Estrella had a hard life and Eliza could see it in the texture of her skin, her hands. She had sunspots, burn marks, round scars, a staple in her shoulder from the smallpox vaccine, and a wart on her wrist. Esperanza, on the other hand, was a pale doll with skin like very milky coffee.

Eliza showed them which rooms needed to be cleaned and what had to be done.

“We need to wash all the sheets,” Eliza explained. The maids never really did it. They thought everything was *good enough*. If someone only stayed one night, the maids would argue that the sheets and towels were still clean. Eliza didn't agree with that. They also pulled the stove out too hard when they cleaned behind there, and sometimes that led to the wires in the back being pulled out. When someone complained that the stove wasn't working, that was usually what the problem was. You were supposed to unplug the stove and then gently slide it out, this

way the wires in the back wouldn't be pulled. Eliza showed every maid this, but no one really followed any of her instructions, so she checked each room before a new visitor came.

“Could you also sweep up the bar and restaurant? A church group rents it out on Sundays.”

Estrella nodded and started to work.

Estrella and Esperanza started with Richard's house. Esperanza found things in there she didn't know existed, and she wasn't sure what they did—all-natural spermicide, for one. Estrella called Richard a *viejo verde*—the typical name for older men who liked the company of young women.

After they found the spermicide, Estrella shooed Esperanza out to collect fruit. Esperanza left, but she didn't want to. She knew that tonight, her mom would talk about how lazy she was.

“You spent the whole day picking fruit, and meanwhile, I was working so hard cleaning,” that's what she would say. Never mind that she had asked her to come. Never mind that she had made her go out and collect fruit. Never mind that Esperanza could have gone to the mall with her friends today. She still hadn't gone to the Starbucks over by *Multiplaza*. All of her friends had been there two, three times, and they all had the photos to prove it.

“You're so spoiled,” that's all her mother talked about. That, and the accident. She always had to hear about her dead father, her dead brother, how hard her father worked, what a disgrace she was and, once, how she should have died instead of her brother.

“Your brother was going to be a strong, hard-working man, like his father. Not like you, you’re turning into a little *puta*.” Esperanza vowed to wear her pants tighter and her eyeliner thicker every time her mother called her a *puta*. She wouldn’t want to disappoint, after all.

When it rained, her mother swept the bar and talked to Luis, the gardener. *She likes him. That’s so gross.* Esperanza thought. Luis was nice enough, but he mentioned his wife every other sentence. He clearly didn’t like her mom. Esperanza, though, might have a chance with him. She was going to be a woman very soon. Luis was good-looking. Esperanza thought that he might be good practice. She would have to practice kissing and sex before she had a boyfriend. She would have to learn how to be good at it, or else, who would marry her?

Esperanza thought these things, but she didn’t have the first idea how to talk to, flirt with, or look at a man. She remembered when a good-looking boy at the mall had approached her, and she’d just looked down at her fries as her friend Laura elbowed her.

She’d never get any better if she kept coming to work with her mom. Esperanza should be out with her friends, not in *el campo* scoping out the one and only man under forty.

Her mom always acted like she needed her help. She made her feel guilty. “Come with me to work. It’s a big place, and you’re all I have in this world.” *All I have in this world.* Those were the words that always made Esperanza sigh, put down her phone and get her hoodie. “You’re all I have in this world since your father left me.” But he hadn’t *left*. He hadn’t *left* the way other dads left—they went to the store and didn’t come back, or just flat-out admitted to having other women and second families. Her friend Natalia had a dad who always toted about compromise. “What’s done is done. I already have a child with another woman. But marriage is forever. Your mom and I need to *compromise*.”

“It’s because men are different,” Esperanza had told her daughter. “Women are happy with one man. But naturally, men aren’t like that. They’re hunters. They’re conquerers. They need to go out and be with other women, like animals in nature. The male always has lots of partners and the female takes care of the children. They can’t help it, as frustrating as it is. Your father wasn’t always perfect, but I could trust him never to get another woman pregnant.” She said that last part with a little too much pride, like he should get a medal for not actually fertilizing another woman. Esperanza rolled her eyes. If Estrella were ever to ask *her* opinion, she would say, “You know what? Dad doesn’t sound so great. It sounds like he fooled around, and he spent money on *guaro*, and he didn’t work enough to make sure we didn’t live in a shithole, and then he died in it.”

Like seducing a man, she could think these things, think them so hard that she felt like they were tattooed to her face, but she couldn’t ever say them.

Instead, she picked mangos. Some had the brown spots of worms when she cut them open. Maggots wriggled out.

I shouldn’t be here.

Luis had to ask Eliza for an advance on his pay. He finished sanding the bar and started varnishing it. He tried not to like the smell of the toxic brown syrup, but he did.

His wife had a pain in that special, magic spot, the spot from which his children had grown. Luis knew a lot of things. He knew how to take care of chickens, how to catch an iguana with his bare hands, how to split a coconut with one thrust of his machete, but that spot was a mystery to him. He could kill his wife easier than he could console her.

Merlin grabbed her stomach and doubled over at random times. Some days, she would be fine, and other times she moaned like she was in labor.

“It’s similar to that pain, but different,” she had said. “With that pain, it’s like you know something good is coming.” Luis had thought that maybe she was pregnant again, but a pregnancy test had shown that no, that wasn’t it.

Since she was Nicaraguan, she couldn’t go to the doctor in Costa Rica. So she’d gone back to Nicaragua, but instead of testing her for anything, the doctors there had just given her a bunch of pills.

“These will get rid of the pain.”

“But what is causing the pain?”

They were not helpful.

That had been a year ago, and since then, Luis and his wife had filled out the paperwork to secure their Costa Rican *cedulas*. Even so, the doctors in Costa Rica couldn’t squeeze her in for testing before *next* year.

“*Another* year? She’ll be dead by then!” Luis had complained when his wife was out of earshot.

Luis had to take his wife to a private hospital. That was why he needed the advance.

The advance would only cover the testing, not any treatment. They would have to worry about that later. For now, they had to have those tests.

He stepped back to look at what he had done. This bar had been sanded and varnished so many times that certain parts dipped. He took another step back when he realized fresh air felt strange to him. He waited for clean air to fill his lungs.

What would happen to his children if his wife died? They were born in Costa Rica, so they could go to school here. But he had to work. Who would take care of them? He couldn't pay someone to watch them. He would have to go back to Nicaragua so his family could watch them as he worked. That felt like a step back, though. They would have better chances here—the schools were better, the healthcare system was better. And since they had *cedulas*, they were in.

He couldn't think this way. Like the ants, who broke leaves apart and carried entire trees underground, Luis was going to have to take it one step at a time.

First, the tests.

Then, the results.

Then—then.

Luis went back to varnishing the bar. The rain started. The judge's car was still there. He saw the girl, Isabelle, catching frogs by herself. Why didn't those people ever leave?

That night, Luis took the bus back to Alajuela. His wife Merlin could hardly move by the time he got home.

They lived in an all right house. They had one bedroom, and another Luis had built by setting up a partition wall in the living room. They had enough room for a table in there, and a small TV and radio on top of it. The signal was awful, and the coat hanger sticking out of the radio didn't work as a great antenna. They didn't live in the shantytown like Estrella and Esperanza. They owned this house and this house was a real house. Luis was proud of that.

Luis had a headache. He looked in the mirror and saw that his eyes were red. When he cut grass, used the leaf blower, or burned rubbish, he usually did so without goggles. He would

wrap a shirt around his face and head to help keep the dust out, and then squint. Eliza had bought him goggles, but he hated how they felt. A pain radiated from his shoulders up his neck and into his brain.

His poor wife. She had done her best to make dinner, but when he entered the house, he could see that she had only halfway finished cutting the peppers and onions. The rice was on the stove. They already had a container of cooked beans in the fridge.

Poor Merlin. She had to work when she was well, take care of the kids, deal with this pain, and do the normal cooking and cleaning. In his daydreams, Merlin would smell like perfume all the time, and she'd be a little heavy, and that would make her small feet look even smaller. They could hire a maid so she could spend all of her time with the kids. They'd pay their maid well, too. And then they could do something of their own, maybe open a restaurant or a disco.

There was a broken mower on the back porch. A neighbor had asked Luis if he could fix it. He'd said yes, of course.

Luis finished making the rice. It was too dry. Last time he had made it, it'd been a swimming pile of slop. Even his kids hated his cooking. They were so young, but that just meant they were honest. They only ate his food if he turned the TV on to distract them from the taste.

Merlin slept through dinner. He brought her some rice, which she gulped down in hard swallows. Luis promised he could take her to a doctor soon.

"Gabriela came by again today," Merlin muttered between dry lips. He fetched her water. "We had a prayer circle." Luis didn't like Gabriela. She came to help with the kids, which was nice, but she was involved in this strange religion. It was like witchcraft with Jesus. Another

woman nearby had gotten involved with them when she couldn't get pregnant. She had been very elegant, and always wore dresses with long sleeves even during the hottest days. Luis forgot her name. She had a high forehead, a pointy nose, and bony cheeks. She'd been happily married, except doctors couldn't understand why she could get but not stay pregnant. Then she'd met Gabriela, who had told her that the sins of those around her were infecting her womb and making it slippery, so slippery, in fact, that the fertilized egg could not stay inside.

Gabriela convinced the woman to come to her day and night, to give her money, to drink strange, strong-smelling fluids. Her husband didn't approve, so she started to hide the drinks in tea and soda bottles. Eventually, they got divorced, and the young lady signed her property over to Gabriela and her "church." Gabriela convinced the girl to marry a Puerto Rican man she knew. They met and married within a month. For all her devotion, though, that girl never got her baby. Then she moved to Puerto Rico to be with him, and she started training to be a priestess or whatever Gabriela was.

He didn't want Merlin seeing Gabriela. He wanted her to see a *doctor*. He wanted her to keep the God she already had. Luis had a spiritual side, of course, but he was cautious of anyone who claimed to have a direct connection to God. Whenever someone started to say that your prayers were worthless, that they didn't reach God, and only *their* word reached God—that's when you had to get away. Luis worked with nature day in and day out. No one was going to tell him that they had a deeper understanding of the spirits on this earth than he did.

But this Gabriela lady made his wife feel better, which was something he was ill-equipped to do.

"She did? Do you feel better?"

“I do. You know, I was thinking of visiting my parents in Nicaragua. Taking the boys for a few days.”

Luis liked this idea very much. That would mean time away from Gabriela, and his wife had a very strong, no-nonsense mother. She could help her. Maybe, as a woman, she would know a bit about the strange pain she was feeling.

“All right. I have the advance from Eliza. She gave me the money. Take the bus on Monday and stay the week, and I’ll schedule the appointment for next Monday or Tuesday.” He hadn’t actually asked Eliza for the money yet, but she didn’t need to know that. Eliza would probably give it to him. Even if she didn’t, he was working for Manuel on Sunday. He would get the money before she came back.

Merlin needed help to sit up. The pain was very bad today. She panted as she walked to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. She went to bed without changing or doing her hair. She used to do her hair and wrap it up every day. She had very curly hair, and she had to take good care of it so it wouldn’t get dry and tangle. Gradually, she stopped the routines that had seemed almost mystical to Luis. What would it be like to have hair so curly and long that you had to sit there with butter and brush and brush, and look at yourself and brush and brush, and then tie up in a little bow?

The sicker Merlin got, the less she engaged in her magical rituals, and that scared Luis more than anything. The sickness was eating through her womanhood, through her soul, through the thing that connected her to God.

Luis could see how everything in nature was like a perfect machine. He could take things apart, he could build. But Merlin didn’t need any knowledge to create miracles. Unlike Luis, she

didn't have to know why babies grew in her in order for it to happen. It was something she could do without knowing how to do it.

He wanted to tell Merlin that he thought she was an angel. By then, though, she was already asleep. Luis kissed her forehead and went back out to get the boys to bed.

The next day was Saturday. Estrella came to work without her daughter. She saw Luis, always hard-working, always patient. She watched him out of the corner of her eye.

“This kitchen is pretty big,” she said. “Do you think there are any brooms or mops in there? Can you show it to me? Do you have the key?”

Luis did. Eliza didn't use this kitchen much, and often spoke about selling the kitchen equipment. All of it worked, and there was no need for it—Everyone here used their own kitchens to cook for themselves.

Luis unlocked the metal sliding door into the kitchen and rolled it open. They had a sink, two grills, fans to move out greasy air, and some spare tires leftover from Pancho's truck when he lived here a few years ago. They walked in. The doors to the walk-in freezers were open. They were turned off. The pantry was covered in cobwebs.

Luis felt Estrella's hands on his hips. She was walking him towards the pantry. He turned and saw a mist in her eyes like soda running over ice. She was against him, and he was hard, even though he didn't want to be. He put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length. Estrella put her hands over his. She was looking at the veins on his hands and imagining how hard he had worked his whole life. How old was he? Almost forty? That meant he had been a child during the revolution back home. His twisted muscles would never let him stop working.

They didn't know how to stop, how to stay in bed. When she touched him, she could see his future. He was going to die cutting grass that would keep on growing.

"No one will know," she said. "Don't we deserve this? To enjoy life once in a while?"

"*Ya, Estrella.*" Luis was thinking of his first wife, his wife in Nicaragua. She couldn't have children. He was thinking of his mother, who used to love to dance. She had a funny cancer in her brain. They had removed a part of her skull, but even before the procedure, they said it wouldn't help. If it wouldn't help, why had they done it? As some kind of sick joke? After the surgery, she couldn't walk right. She couldn't really dance.

Then she had to wear diapers, which they couldn't afford.

Then she was in a wheelchair, which they couldn't afford.

All the while, his father was running around with younger women, prettier women, women who could still dance, women with their skulls intact. And Luis and his brothers and sisters watched their mother die.

"No, Estrella. I'm married."

"You want this." She was referring to that thing in his pants.

"That thing moves on its own, but it doesn't make decisions without me. Let's go. I have to sand the tables by the main house."

Estrella smacked him. It was an excuse to touch him again. Maybe then he would get angry and take the sex. Why was it fair that her husband got to cheat, got to cheat and then got to die, and left her with everything? Even if she fucked Luis, she was free to do it. She could never get back at her husband for that hurt. She wanted him to be there, in that kitchen, watching her fuck a man who was *like* him but *not* him. A *better* version of him.

But it was because Luis was a better version of him that he would not do it.

Estrella let out a whimper like a cat being stepped on.

“Don’t do this. Let’s go. We work here. This never happened. Come on.” Eliza gave him the best job he ever had, and his *cedula*. “You go. I will lock the kitchen. I need to get something from the pantry.” A lie. He had to wait for the lump in his pants to dissolve.

Estrella turned and walked out on the tips of her toes. Luis closed his eyes. He felt the room’s vacancy. He could smell burgers and french fries. He could smell the delicious treats he never ate as a child. Or was he smelling memories? He remembered one of his sisters holding a shovel. She was six. What was she shoveling? Her skirt was already covered in dirt. And Luis already had a machete in his hand. His older brother had been shot. He had been at a friend’s house hiding under a table. Luis didn’t know the whole story. He didn’t know any of the stories. Just fragments. Fragments of a picture of pain. And his father, a coward. His older brother, now older, with nightmares that wouldn’t go away.

“There’s something so intimate about killing someone with a machete.” Luis caught his brother saying that half to himself, half to God, in a dream-prayer in church. “You wouldn’t know anything about it, you coward.” That was directed to God.

Then Luis was back in the kitchen. His erection, gone. He could hear Estrella sweeping. He left the kitchen and locked the door. Tomorrow would be better. He would be working for Manuel. Estrella didn’t work Mondays, just Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, so he wouldn’t have to see her for a while. Hopefully she would pretend it didn’t happen or, better yet, ignore him completely.

Richard's car was gone, and so was Francisco's, Luis noticed. Today would be a good day to add the rest of the bars to Eliza's house. He could do it when no one was around, so no one would question what he was doing.

Before he left Saturday, Luis had gotten the advance from Eliza and had made the appointment for Merlin. The doctor couldn't squeeze her in so fast, even at a private hospital, so they'd have to wait an extra week. That was fine. Having to wait a week for a private hospital was better than a year for the public one.

Sunday morning, Gabriela came over to watch the kids while Manuel worked. She had hairy legs that she tried to hide under long skirts and pants, but Luis could see her bushy ankles. Luis took the local bus to Turrucare, where Manuel lived.

Luis was disappointed to find that Manuel was not there. He lived in a small one-story house in a gated community. The town knew that there was an American homosexual living in there who had a Costa Rican lover. They all knew which house, too. It was hard to live that kind of life in such a small town. The gay man owned a horse, and of course there were all kinds of rumors about the sick things he must be doing with it.

Manuel owned about five dogs, all angry. They were tied up, and they barked at Luis while he worked.

Eugenia was there in a red bikini top and short shorts. Her cellulite looked like the inside of a marshmallow. She asked him all kinds of questions, and requested a lock of Eliza's hair.

"I just like the color," she had said. "I was thinking of dyeing my hair. Or, if you can get a photo of her, that would work, too." Luis wasn't stupid. Eugenia was clearly practicing witchcraft.

“I don’t have anything like that, Eugenia. I’ll just start raking if you can point me to the tools?”

She did. He raked and tried to avoid eye contact. She stayed inside for a little bit, but then came out to lounge in the sun and rub oil on herself.

“Manuel and I aren’t getting along,” she blurted after the sun went behind a cloud. The dogs were barking, so she repeated herself. “I’m not getting along with my husband, Luis.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Sometimes a marriage can be hard.” Luis had heard that Eugenia shouted at Manuel, more than once, in public. He found that very disrespectful—He found what she was wearing to be inappropriate. But that wasn’t his business. She wasn’t his wife. “It’s important to communicate.”

“I think I need another boyfriend,” she said. “It’s not going to work out.” Luis grew tense. What was she trying to do? He went in search of a backpack of poison to spray the ants. She surely could not try to make love to him if he was wearing poison.

“Do you think I’m attractive, Luis?”

I just want to work my jobs and get my money. What is wrong with all of these women lately? Luis pretended he hadn’t heard her from the dogs barking. She changed the subject.

“I don’t see why Manuel has to be over at Eliza’s all the time. What do they talk about?”

“I don’t know, Eugenia, really. I just cut the lawn. The place is so big, I don’t even know when he’s over, much less what they talk about.”

I should get the lawn mower. She won’t try anything if I’m mowing the lawn, he thought. Maybe she would go back inside.

He hadn't lied; marriage *was* hard. He was in his second marriage, although he wasn't sure if he was legally divorced from his first wife. What did paperwork matter, though, when you *knew* something was over?

After she had her female parts removed, they knew. She couldn't have kids. They weren't rich enough to adopt, and besides, he wouldn't want to. He wanted kids. *His own* kids.

He couldn't bring himself to have the talk. Even though she wasn't sick anymore, Luis treated her like she was. She had to tell him where she was going, and how she was getting there. He sent cabs for her, something he had never done before.

"I'm not sick," she said one day. "You need to stop spending all this money on me. I'm fine."

Luis didn't say anything. How could he? She had to know. He started treating her differently because she couldn't have kids and because he wanted to end the relationship. He didn't know how. So his behavior became strange—like she was the child he could not have.

"You don't think I'm a woman anymore, do you?"

"Of course I think you're a woman."

"But you want children. And I can't have them."

He couldn't deny it. It was true. When they got married, they talked about how many children they would have. Now she seemed more like an empty doll than a whole woman.

"I do. Yes, I want children."

She started to cry. He had tried to console her, and she pushed him off and ran out of the house. That was the only discussion they could have about it. What else was there to discuss?

They had to be realistic. If she couldn't have kids, and if they couldn't adopt, then he would need to be with someone else.

He saw her only a couple of times after that. She was with her mother both times, her eyes puffy. Her mother too looked defeated. She probably told her daughter that it would be for the best, that there was nothing else that could be done unless Luis went outside the marriage. Luis didn't want to make things that complicated. If he impregnated another woman, she would have to live with them. Then he would have two wives and a child, and his first wife would certainly be jealous of the second. It was better to break up and have a clean, fresh start with a new wife.

It didn't rain that day, so Luis stayed the entire day. The sound of the dogs barking gave him another headache. He tried to drink water, but it didn't seem to help. It hurt to blink—it hurt his teeth and his ears popped. A pain radiated from his neck down to his hip. As the sun started to go down, Eugenia made no mention of paying him. Manuel still wasn't around; he wished he was. He would feel more comfortable asking Manuel about the money. He liked working at Eliza's better—the people there were nicer, the girls prettier.

There had been a few times, after Sergio had left, that Luis had caught Clara brushing her hair with her top off, her window open. He caught a glimpse of light brown, almost pink nipple, a wide aureola, and pale breasts next to tan arms, then he had looked away. He suspected that she wanted him to see, then dismissed this as wishful thinking.

Part of him wondered. Clara seemed so different, and kind of frail—frustrated with the mild heat, with the slowness of the Internet, with having to sit up to drink. It wouldn't be the kind of hot, athletic affair he was used to with his wife . . . They would paw at one another in the

dark while the kids slept, desperate for those moments in-between taking care of the kids and working.

I hope there is some kind of divine justice, Luis thought. I've been giving up a lot of sex lately.

Luis went back to Eliza's the next day. His headache had not gone away. He didn't remember taking the bus, or eating, and he had forgotten to bring a lunch. It took him a good minute to unlock the gate.

Eliza took one look at him when she went to get the newspaper, and then shook her head and threatened to send him home. Luis didn't want that. He tried to rake, and he thought he saw Clara run up to him, but she didn't have any hair, just uneven patches where her curls had been. Just as quickly, she faded away. She had the urgency of a squirrel being chased by a hawk.

Eliza came to see him. She had a rag, she had her hands on her hips.

"You don't look well, Luis."

"I think . . . I think the American girl cut her hair off."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"You need to go to a doctor. I'll drive you."

Luis leaned over and put most of his weight on the rake.

"I don't need that."

"You're not working the rest of the day. You're going to the doctor."

“I’ll go to the doctor. Fine. But I can take the bus.” He had a headache, he wasn’t an invalid.

The doctor checked him out quickly, asked if he had allergies, and then gave him two shots in his back.

“These are muscle relaxants,” he said.

“Which muscles are tight?”

“All of them. What you really need are regular massages . . .” the doctor saw the look on Luis’s face. “. . . or just to rest more. Especially after these shots. You need to rest today.”

“All right. But what does this have to do with my headaches?”

“Everything is connected. The muscles in your back and neck are straining, pulling. It’s really just a matter of getting enough rest and water.”

Luis came back to Eliza’s to tell her the good news.

“Nothing is really wrong with me. The doctor gave me some muscle relaxants and said I’m fine.”

“Is that all he said?”

“He just said I needed to rest more. But nothing is really wrong with me.”

“How did he give you the muscle relaxants? Is it a pill?”

“He gave me shots.”

“And said to come back to work?”

“He told me to rest after the shots, but I feel fine, really.” He did. He could see again, and remember things for more than five minutes.

Eliza disappeared into the house and pulled out a set of keys. They were for number three. No one was in number three . . . no one was *ever* in number three.

“Rest for today. Stay in three.”

“No, Dona Eliza, that’s really all right. I would rather rest at home, anyway.”

“But you wouldn’t rest at home. You have the kids, and you would probably start fixing things or building something. I want you to stay here and really rest.” She was right. How could he be home and *not* help out, especially when his wife was *actually* sick?

“Go *rest*, Luis. I’ll pay you for today. Your health is too important. You need to get better. I know how men like you are. You’ll just work and work until you can’t move. That’s no good.”

Luis shrugged. She was getting all caring and womanly, like he was her son and not a worker. There was no use in arguing—he knew this from his own wife and mother. When they got like this, it was best to do what they said.

Eliza opened the door to number three. Anyone who ever stayed in three claimed to have nightmares, to see shapes. There were probably bats or spirits in the walls. But it was daytime, and it would be fine for now. Things like that usually happened at night.

“Now, sleep. Here’s a book if you want to read.” Luis took the book, but he wouldn’t read it. He thought a moment—He hadn’t read a book from cover to cover since sixth grade. He had finished his first year of high school, but he sort of got by without reading. He *could* read, of course, he wasn’t *so so* bad, not like his brother. Reading was just not something he did. It was nice, of course, to have the time and sit and go to other worlds through a book, but he had never had the attention span or the time. The present moment always demanded all of his focus.

He sat in bed and nodded at Eliza. She closed the curtains as Luis kicked off his work boots. Then he realized—

“Dona Eliza, I’m in my work clothes. Your sheets are going to get dirty.”

“Then I’ll wash them. I would have washed them anyway. Stop worrying and rest.”

She left and closed the door. Luis looked at the thin light coming in from the closed curtains. He thought something fluttered—a hummingbird, probably.

He had so much to do.

He should burn some of the leaves down by the river. It was the perfect time. The rain would come in an hour and put the fire out. He wouldn’t be able to do it in the afternoon, the ground would be too wet.

Luis should be sanding the doors to the villas. He had bought a new sandpaper, very fine. They would feel like butter when he was done. Luis was going to do that in the afternoon, after the rain.

Now none of it would be done. After the doors, he was going to sand the tables in the communal kitchen area. Everything would be set back a day. The pile of leaves in the back would be that much higher. And the grass! The grass could grow a full inch in a day during the rainy season. The stuff just grew and grew.

He had to take the trash out. It was full. If it sat overnight, it would attract rats, *zorros*, and insects. Roaches . . .

Luis saw a figure standing at the foot of the bed. He recognized it. But that was impossible. He must have fallen asleep. He didn’t feel asleep, but this was *impossible*.

It was his brother. Not his brother as a full-grown man, but his brother around age ten. Luis wouldn't have been born. Luis had no memories of his brother until he was fourteen at the youngest. He was already changed by then.

And his face was gone. It was replaced with a thin layer of burnt skin. It smoldered around the ears. The center breathed, brightened, and turned gray like someone taking a drag out of a cigarette.

“What are you? You're not my brother. You're the devil.”

It didn't move.

“What do you want? Get out of here. I'll kill you. I'm not afraid of you.”

The thing pointed at Luis's legs. He looked down to see they had been cut off at the knees. The cartilage pointed up. In his right hand, he held a bloody machete.

Luis tried to back up, to push himself away from his own severed legs, and then he woke up.

He grabbed his legs. He looked at his hands. No machete. The sheets were wet. Oh god. Had he peed? Had he peed? No. No, it was sweat . . . a lot of sweat.

Nothing was at the foot of his bed.

Luis got up. He was fine. His shoulders already felt looser. He was going to take out the trash. He was going to burn the leaves by the river, watch the fire and imagine that creature dying in the flames.

This is why it's not good to rest too much, he thought. Es malo pensar mucho.

Chapter 5: Jaco Used to Be Fun (and So Were You)

Clara would go to the beach with Richard over the weekend. She decided not to tell him —It would be good for him to wait.

Suzie had started talking to that Costa Rican guy. He was all right looking, but a little fat, and probably not the best Suzie could do.

Clara was working Richard over. She had explained her idea about a jewelry store, and he loved it. She knew Suzie was worried about her share of June's rent, but she would have it, and she wouldn't fuck for it. The trick was to get the money without giving up the sex, right? That was where power came from. If men were going to assume she was stupid, if they were going to grab her ass at every turn, if they were going to harass her and call it a compliment, then she should get *something*, right?

Friday evening, after the fat maid and her daughter had gone home, Clara found Richard by the bar with a deck of cards. He tried to deal, but Luis had done too good a job of varnishing —The cards slipped right off the bar and onto the floor. She laughed and picked one up. It was the five of spades. She was a little disappointed that it wasn't a Queen.

“Are you still going to Jaco tomorrow?”

“Sure, sure. I have a small house there. I bought it before it got all commercialized.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, now it’s all filled with surfers living in these tents made of trash bags. There used to be just one hotel, one little bar. You could make a bonfire in the sand. Then all the Americans came.”

Clara didn’t point out his hypocrisy.

“So can I still come?”

“Oh sure. Sure. My house is all stocked with toiletries from the U.S.” he said. “I even have Q-tips from there. Have you ever noticed that the swabs here don’t have cotton?” Clara hadn’t, but she didn’t want to admit that she hadn’t cleaned her ears in months.

“Yeah, it’s like...toothpicks.”

Richard laughed. He liked that. He liked complaining.

They were supposed to leave early Saturday morning, but Richard and Clara didn’t leave until noon. She decided to wear her most wrinkled skirt, then she shaved everything that had been accruing since she’d been in Costa Rica. She pinned her blonde curls up, then let it fall, then pinned it back up. She decided to pin the top half and leave the rest flowing. She wanted to look like a mess.

She put a bikini on under a ripped *The Smiths* shirt. She had to be young but not *too* young. That was the thing with these older guys. They wanted someone with a youthful spirit, but became too self-conscious when their “dates” knew all the words to Britney Spears’s “Lucky.” Clara didn’t know much about The Smiths except for that *one* song that was in the intro to *Charmed*, but Richard probably wouldn’t dig too deep.

Clara packed her overnight backpack and smeared some black eyeliner on. She looked clumsy, like she had rolled out of bed and grabbed her satchel.

“It’ll be fine. It only takes like forty minutes to get there now.” Clara smiled and nodded like a therapist. “It used to take two hours,” he said as they got into his car. “It was ridiculous. Then they built this highway, thank God. I mean, it’s not a highway like what *we* would consider a highway. But it’s better than nothing.” Richard drove up to the gate and Clara opened it for him, closed it behind him. They made a right out of Eliza’s and another right just by the soccer field.

Richard talked about how he used to travel with his wife before things became so “Americanized.” He complained about how Costa Rica was too much and too little like the United States.

“Costa Rican women know how to take care of themselves, though. They still respect men...but *respect* them, you know? In the U.S., it’s become stylish to disrespect men and call it feminism.”

Clara thought: *Richard wants a pet, not a girlfriend.*

Richard turned the radio on. Old rock played—Clara recognized it as *Twilight Zone* by Golden Earring. Something was a little strange about it, then she realized it was a live version of the song.

“One thing Costa Rica got right, though, is the radio,” Richard said. Clara sighed through her nose. She always thought rich men would be great talkers, and they always disappointed her.

By the time they reached the highway, it was starting to drizzle. The *pista* was a two-lane road blown into a mountain. Clara stuck her hand out the window to feel the drizzle.

I could learn to be psychic, she thought. I could heal people. I could . . . learn how to communicate with the dead.

Clara rolled her hands like a butterfly dodging raindrops. Richard was complaining about the *Smashing Pumpkins* marathon on the radio. Clara hardly noticed the rain coming down harder. She had her eyes closed, her hands spinning, her mind drifting into the akashic records.

She heard Richard say, “*Holy Shit!*” and she opened her eyes. In the rearview mirror, she saw a motorcycle spinning.

“What happened?!” Clara turned around. She saw only mud, something brown, and a sheet of rain. She saw something round—the helmet?—spin towards the ground.

“Hit by a rock.”

“What?!”

“A rock fell. It’s fine. He’s fine!”

“Richard, stop the car!” Clara turned back towards Richard and grabbed his shoulder.

“No one can prove we saw that.” Richard accelerated. The rain slowed.

“Richard!”

“Look. It’s fine. Someone else stopped.”

Clara turned back and saw that he was right. Another car had stopped for the motorcyclist.

“Besides, you know how long that shit would take?”

Suzie pretended to sleep while Clara left. Since Richard came, their relationship depended on who was pretending what. She hated it. And she hated that she was going to spend

her day working, patrolling sites for articles, translating and editing poorly written English for startups that she knew would go nowhere. The Internet was this hungry beast, and it only wanted words and more words, and vitriolic comments, and *opinions*. God, it wanted opinions. The Internet monster wanted more opinions than facts. And someone would pay her to write them—a few cents a word here, a buck or two there. She could snag a few book reviews and write for a quasi-political site that did little more than rewrite actual news articles and load them down with name-calling.

That's how she would spend her day, and Clara would be at the beach, her skin getting darker, her hair getting lighter, her eyes glowing as they reflected the blue of the ocean, her breasts exposed, her body oiled up and radiant and smelling like that all-natural insect repellent she always wore.

She'll probably get the money, too, Suzie thought. I'll do all the worrying for nothing, and she'll end up with her half. She thought about cleaning up for Eliza and making up the difference that way, but she didn't know how to clean with chlorine the way they did here. They didn't even have real mops. They had some kind of metal rod where you could snap a rag in. Back home, Suzie used a *Swiffer*.

I don't even have the skills for a minimum wage job, Suzie thought.

Clara and Richard spent the day lounging at the beach. . . well, Clara tried to lounge, while Richard continued on with his essay on how the United States was a superior nation.

“ . . . So I told the cop, in the best Spanish I could, that shit like this was why Costa Rica is still basically a fuckin' third world country . . . ”

He didn't seem to stop. Clara wondered how she was going to bring up money. She became suddenly aware that May was almost over. June rent would be due soon. She hadn't been keeping any track of her credit card, but she would be shocked if there was more than a hundred bucks left on there. She had also apparently opened up a PayPal credit card—When did she do that? During that black void in the jungle, maybe, during one of her expeditions to the Internet cafe? She hadn't paid for her time in the jungle. She'd never tell Suzie this, but she had bought food and cooked for the entire camp in order to stay there for free. She might have opened up that PayPal card to buy food. They insisted on organic, vegan, sugar-free food, and that stuff cost money.

She looked out at the beach. Red parrots flew overhead. She tried to point them out to Richard and he wasn't impressed. Clara put a silent video of the waves on Instagram, but made sure Richard wasn't in it. All her friends went home would see that she was having a great time at the beach, and that she hadn't at all had a mental breakdown.

Clara swam for a little bit. She wore a lace bra and old bikini bottoms that sort of worked, but they were pretty transparent. Luckily, she had shaved that zone before coming here. *Did I clean my pubes out of the shower?* She wondered. She had been so excited, that maybe not.

Richard didn't swim. He didn't like the salt water, the sand, the beach part of the beach.

That night they sat at a hotel bar by the water. Clara wore her bra and a wrap skirt around her waist. Richard ordered cocktail after cocktail, paying American prices for drinks that would cost less than half at the local bar. Then he complained that Costa Rica hadn't mastered mixology the way they had in New York.

Clara heard music across the street and saw girls with long dark hair and tight jeans strolling down the sidewalk. *I bet they're going dancing*, she thought. *They're not stuck with old men. They're not stuck sitting with him at a hotel bar because he's paying for everything.* Would he expect sex with her? Is that why he was so generous?

Clara remembered a movie...what was it called? A beautiful woman with long hair and a sparkly dress, reduced to drugs and screaming because her husband had tight control of the money. If she wanted something, she had to tell him what she wanted, and he would buy it for her. She couldn't get out. She ended up tying her own daughter to a bed so she could be with her lover. At the end of the movie, she overdosed and died. She didn't remember what the husband did. She just remembered that woman—so strong at the beginning, so destroyed at the end.

A group of young men with too much gel in their hair and thin tank tops laughed as they walked by. Clara could tell by their laugh (and how they were dressed) that they were Americans.

“This town has a lot of kids in it,” Richard noted. “It didn't used to be this way—”

“Things change, I guess.” Clara didn't recognize her voice. *She* was one of those kids. She wanted to take a yoga class on the beach and hit on surfers and go dancing wearing practically nothing.

“Are you all right?”

She wasn't all right. She checked her phone again, and found that the Internet wasn't working. She had a message from her phone company—her cell data had been turned off due to excessive roaming charges. She connected with the bar's wifi to check her video of the waves. Ten *likes*.

“I might be hungry.”

“You’re too funny. I guess you want me to buy you dinner now, too. You’re an expensive girl. Expensive meals, expensive bar...”

Clara hadn’t *asked* for this place. She would prefer a hostel and a watering hole filled with *Ed Hardy* bros who made bad jokes and posed for photos (that ended up being videos because someone used the wrong setting). She wanted to hear their racist, sexist remarks and judge them, and then judge the girls who actually left with them. She wanted to get drunk, kiss a girl, and *Snapchat* it. She wanted to see what Kim Kardashian was doing—if she was thin or fat or photoshopping herself this week. She didn’t want to be at an expensive bar with this old fucking man and his boner that (hopefully) didn’t work.

She sipped her Diet Coke. It had come with a shot of rum on the side, but she didn’t drink the rum. She wanted to stay sober. Then they left the waves behind, piled into Richard’s truck and headed back to his house. Clara imagined herself drowning in the dark, the cold ink and strong current forcing its way into her mouth and into her lungs.

They entered the dark house and Clara reached for the light. Light switches in Costa Rican houses, for some reason, were never where you thought they were. A light for the kitchen might be in the laundry room. The bathroom light was outside the bathroom, etc.

Richard was drunk and rambling about his wife. “She could always tell when I was thinking about someone else during sex,” he muttered. “I didn’t like to look into her eyes. I’d look at that space between her forehead and I wouldn’t say her name.” Clara found the light, a single dim light bulb for the whole kitchen and living room area.

Richard’s hands like a pair of snakes grabbed Clara’s head and wove around her hair. He was petting her, grabbing her, trying to coerce her away from the door. She stood stiff. “What has

been your problem this whole time?” He asked. “We’re at the beach. You’re not even excited.” He pushed against her and she could feel that he was hardening. *Oh God, it works*, she thought. *He’s going to try something*.

“You’re drunk, Richard. I’m having a good time. I think I’m just going to go to bed now. I’m tired.”

“The bed is too far.” He pushed her legs open with his knee. Startled, Clara fell backwards. He caught her and walked her backwards towards the couch. She tried to close her legs, but he’d already gotten both of his legs between hers. She felt his stomach on her thighs as she fell over the back of the couch. “This works much better.” Clara was bent over the back of the couch, her head on the seat. She tried to sit up to hit him, but all Richard had to do was wiggle her legs and she’d fall back down. Clara tried to flip over, and then to scream, but Richard just turned the TV on and turned the volume up as he held her down with the other hand. *Oh God, he’s done this before*, Clara managed to think before she felt him slide her bikini bottoms to the side. *He’s just going to do it. He’s not going to stop*. She closed her eyes. She didn’t want to see it. She felt him enter her in one thrust. She shut her mouth and closed her eyes harder as he rocked. She wasn’t going to make a sound. He wasn’t going to think she was enjoying this. After a couple of minutes of him moving her legs and rocking back and forth, Richard sighed and pulled out. He’d gone limp. He threw her legs over the side of the couch and zipped up his pants.

“You could have at least *tried*. No wonder I couldn’t stay hard. You’re like a fucking beached whale.” He pulled his shirt off and walked to the bathroom. She heard the water running, heard him start to brush his teeth. “I know I should have found a *tica* to fuck. They may

be gold diggers, but they can show a man a good time,” he muffled. Clara sat up and fixed her bathing suit and the skirt she’d worn over it. She wanted to go back to Eliza’s. She didn’t want to stay here. But there were probably no buses this late, and a cab would cost what? \$50? \$100? And she didn’t think they accepted credit cards. She was sure they didn’t.

She had to stay here, even after being—

What? Raped? Was that rape? No, right? Just drunk sex. Besides, I did come with him to the beach. And he didn’t even cum.

—after being tricked into having sex.

He finished brushing his teeth.

“Look,” he said. “I realize now that this might have been too fast for you. I’m sorry. Any way I can make it up?” He was dry as he said this. Clara recognized that the speech was rehearsed. *How many girls*—She couldn’t finish the thought. But this would be the only time she could bring it up.

“Well, maybe. There is something.”

“What is it?” Richard was already pulling out his wallet. Clara remembered Suzie’s question. She had been right. Clara was a whore.

“I could use a few hundred bucks, just to last me until I get back home.”

Richard snorted and pulled out a cluster of twenty-dollar American bills and twenty-thousand colones bills.

“There. That should be enough.”

Clara didn’t count it. She rolled the colorful money into a ball and kept it in her hand. Should she go back now? No, she needed to save that money for the rent.

“Goodnight.” Richard went into one of the bedrooms and left the kitchen light on. A moth flew into it until it died.

Clara counted the money again and again and again, and waited for dawn. \$350, about. She didn’t brush her teeth. She didn’t get changed. What would it matter? She was a whore. She took a break only to go into the kitchen, look for a knife, and then stare at it. Her arms became rigid. Her legs started to creak.

I can hear my bones falling apart. I bet I have a disease now. I bet he gave me a disease. His dickjuice is eating through my vagina and my uterus. Like battery acid.

Clara shook her head and put the knife down.

You’re overreacting. Nothing happened.

Suzie finished her work by four on Saturday. She had more than enough to cover her own share of the rent. Then she looked outside. It was dark by six here. She could swim for an hour. She could go down by the bar, where there was no Internet, and maybe write something of her own, something just for her.

I should really get another job. Write another review. Do another blog post about being an angry young female. Something.

She put in her headphones and went for a walk around the property. It was overcast. A shot of lightning walked like a spider across the sky.

So much for swimming.

Suzie walked down the path towards the bar and saw Francisco's parked car, a red MINI Cooper. He usually didn't stay on the weekends. He worked during the week, then went home to wherever his home was.

She walked towards the bar and saw Francisco sitting there with a woman. She was beautiful, with black slacks and a blue blouse. She was sitting, but Suzie imagined she had a plump bottom and a thigh gap. She pretended not to look, and focused her attention on a fallen green mango. She picked it up and acted like she was considering it.

With salt, it could taste good.

They looked animated. Suzie squeezed the mango and inhaled its scent. Hard, grainy, charged with the condensed power of a hundred rains. Then she dropped it and kept walking.

I'm so dumb. The girls in Costa Rica are so beautiful. Even with his little belly, I'm sure he has his pick of ladies.

She walked to the end of the property and tried to climb a mango tree, but it was too slippery from rain and she ended up falling and scratching a knee. Luis wasn't there. She would have been humiliated if he had seen her. She had seen him inch up a coconut tree with a machete in his mouth. He had moved up like a worm, his hips rocking a little too rhythmically, the rope he used as a belt loop coming a bit undone. If he had seen her fumbling over her big thighs and falling out of the tree, she would die.

I'm just good for sitting in front of the computer. I should go back in my room where I belong. Clara was right. Why am I even here? I'm not doing anything.

The rain started to hit the ground harder. Suzie rolled up her headphones and held her phone under her shirt as she ran up the path. By the time she reached the bar, it was raining too

hard to keep going. The girl was gone. Francisco was still sitting there with a stack of papers. He had turned on the light by the bar.

He wears glasses. It's kind of cute.

“Suzie, hello!” He waved.

She walked towards him and looked up at the paintings above the bar. When the lights were off, which was most of the time, she forgot they were there. A toucan, a pack of macaws, a waterfall and the rainforest. Water hit the metal roof like thunderous applause. Suzie saw a flash and the sky cracked open. She fell, pushed by magnetic air. The electric force forced an exhale and a squeal. The lights in the bar went out.

“You all right? It scaring you?” Francisco was on his knees in front of her.

“What was that?!” Suzie looked around.

“*Rayos*. Very close.”

“Lightning?”

“Yes.” Francisco helped her up, then saw her bloodied knee. “You are hurt?”

“Oh, not from—that was from . . . something else. I was climbing trees.” Suzie pulled back from him and turned to face the rain. Sheets of glass fell from the sky and shattered on the footpath. They watched it together in silence until the lightning moved farther and farther away. The bar lights came back on and Francisco went back to his papers.

“I have to do this for the bank. The woman, she came from the bank.”

“Oh, I thought that maybe she was your . . . I don’t know. That you were dating.”

“Dating? What is dating?”

“Like she was . . .” Suzie trailed off. Why was she like this?

“Ah, *una novia?*”

“Yeah, that.”

“No, no. Just from the bank. I have to do this now. But you want to go to the *tope* with me tomorrow?”

Suzie should work, probably. Write more blog posts about being angry. Read more self-published books about sex monsters or sex robots or sex machines or sex animals or people dressed as sex animals. And what was a *tope*? She didn't want to ask. It had to be fun, though, right? People asked you to do fun things with them. He wasn't asking her to go to the bank.

Clara ditched you to have fun. And this guy is at least around your age. You have your half of the money. Just go.

It was the same voice that had told her to quit her job, stop paying her loans and come to Costa Rica. It nagged under her skin, it released a black ink into her bloodstream and paralyzed her. She had never understood what made some kids overachieve throughout high school, and then drop out of college to bartend. Now she did.

You're over-thinking this. Just go.

The voice was right. Suzie realized that a long time (seconds?) had passed.

“The...the what?”

“The *tope*.”

That hadn't helped as much as she thought it would. She thought he would use another word if she acted confused.

“Oh! Sure. Yeah. When would we leave?”

“In the morning? Leave here, maybe ten?”

“Sounds good. And...uhm...what should I wear?”

“Erm, what?”

“Wear. What...ropa?”

“Oh! Jeans? Boots? What you wear to ride a horse.”

A *what*? They were going to *what* a horse? Suzie tried to control her face, her eyes. The rain had stopped. She could hear a woodpecker. The sun was going down soon. Francisco collected his papers from the bar and waited for her to respond.

“Yes! Sure. Okay. Sounds good. What I would wear to ride a horse. Tomorrow. Yes. I’ll be ready at ten. See you then!”

“You are not walking up?” Crap. He was right. They were going to walk up together. She had said goodbye too prematurely.

“No, actually! I was walking around the trees before the rain. Listening to music.” She held up her phone. “So I’m going to keep doing that. See you!” Suzie put her headphones in and walked down towards the mango grove.

She saw smoke smoldering down by the creek. She walked towards it. Fire? Eliza was down there facing a pile of dry palm tree branches, sticks, and black, charred ash.

“Eliza? Did this get hit by lightning?”

“Hi, Suzie. No, no. I was burning things here before it started to rain. I was just making sure the fire went out. How are you?”

“I’m okay. I have a question. Francisco asked me if I wanted to go to the *tope*.”

“Oh, those are so fun. You should go!”

“I said yes, but . . . I don’t exactly know what it is.”

Eliza laughed. She always wore khaki pants, Suzie noted. She never wore jeans. It was always a simple button-up shirt and khaki pants with sandals, but not flip-flips. Her shoes always had a little pump to them. She was pretty, actually, for an older lady.

“A *tope*. It’s basically when everyone chips in money to the town hosting the *tope*, and if you have a horse, you ride in it. They close the streets and ride horses and at the end, there’s usually a party.”

“They just ride horses? For how long?”

“All day. And you eat and drink. Sometimes actors and singers come. In the Alajuela *tope* a few years ago, the President was there, riding her horse. You should go! It’s fun.”

“I don’t know.”

“You haven’t gone out that much, I noticed.”

“I’ve been working. I’m worried.”

“About Clara?”

Suzie watched the smoke rise. A trail of ash flowed into the stream at the end of the property. She heard a rooster crow. The tension in the air always left after the rain.

“About Clara, about life. We’re going to have to go home soon, and we don’t really have a plan.”

“You make a plan in this world, and sometimes it goes up just like that smoke. You try for what you want, but you can’t get mad when things don’t go exactly as planned.”

Suzie nodded to be polite. Horse-riding. She had to find shoes that would match her jeans. She’d grown used to wearing cheap sandals with her jeans, and the ends were frayed. She

could tuck her jeans into her shoes, but she wasn't sure if she had the right shoes to pull that look off. Clara could have helped her with that. She wondered if she was having fun at the beach.

At least I have the studio to myself tonight. They'll probably be back tomorrow.

Richard didn't get up until twelve. Clara asked if they could go back to Eliza's.

“God. I just got up. Can't I relax?”

He closed the door to the bathroom and didn't come out for an hour. Clara peed on the couch while he was in there. She didn't know why. For a moment, as the warmth spread, she thought maybe it was blood. Maybe it was puss from some sores he had implanted into her vagina. It was an abortion, maybe. A dying fetus had shattered and leaked out.

But no. It was just urine. Plain, simple pee. It started to smell as Clara continued to sit in it. The warmth was comforting.

I can do this. I can ask. Clara wiggled. I can keep asking until he takes me back. After all, nothing happened.

She stood and flipped the pillow in the sofa. The other side was dry. He would never know. She had a secret. She'd pissed on his couch. That made her feel better, somehow.

She changed out of her bathing suit into a sundress and sprayed some perfume around. Then she remembered the knife and had another idea. She went back into the kitchen, collected her curly blonde hair into a ponytail, and cut just an inch off. He might notice more than that.

The chunk fell onto the counter. She could hear Richard coughing and spitting into the sink. Clara took the hair and stuffed it under the couch cushion. She felt the damp spot, which was cooling rapidly.

If another girl comes, maybe she'll find it. Then she'll know that it's a warning, and she'll leave.

Clara relaxed and waited on the couch for Richard. She felt like she had done something good. When he came out, he had braided his hair. He'd washed up.

"Leaving already, huh? Well, I guess you got what you wanted. I guess that means I have to bring you *back*." Clara wanted to sit in the back seat, but that would be disrespectful, right?

"What's the matter with you? Get in the damn car."

Clara obeyed. Shouldn't she give a sarcastic response? That's what she would have done before. If he had tried to boss her around like that two days ago, she would have laughed and walked along the highway barefoot until he begged her to get into the car. She might have hitchhiked back home with a Jeep filled with surfer guys. She would have pulled her blonde hair out of her ponytail and given Richard both middle fingers.

She could still do all those things.

I am still independent and strong. I'm still myself. I'm still me. I'm just going along with this because right now, I really want to get back to Eliza's. Clara got into the front seat. *I'm going to control the radio on the way back. I can at least do that.*

Richard got into the front and paused before turning the car on. More red birds flew overhead. Clara didn't point them out this time.

"Let's go to Taco Bar. My treat. Last night . . . I was drunk. It was all too fast. Me and you, we're still friends, right?" Clara nodded. "And all this doesn't have to come up again?"

Clara nodded again. "Okay. Glad that's settled."

Taco Bar was along the main street in Jaco, just past the *Pops* Ice Cream store. You could sit on a swing along a bench, or eat at a table. Clara would normally have picked the swing. Richard insisted that swinging while eating would be too hard. Some shirtless American guys waited in line in front of them. They were flirting with the waitress, who clearly thought they were morons. Clara giggled at their terrible Spanish.

“Well *they’re* taking their sweet time,” Richard “whispered.” The American guys heard, paid for their meals, and gave them dirty looks.

“Let’s get away from the old man and his gold-digging whore,” the lead one said as they took their receipts and fish tacos. “By the way, nice ponytail.”

Richard pretended not to hear them. He ordered her shrimp tacos. Clara sat with her backs to the Americans and swallowed pickled jalapeños. The burning and subsequent belly ache made her feel like all traces of his dick in her were disintegrating into ash. Didn’t forests need to burn to be cleansed?

Suzie decided to wear Clara’s jeans to the *tope*. They were skintight but stretchy, and they weren’t frayed at the bottom like all of Suzie’s pants. *I should get my jeans hemmed. I never do.* Costa Rican girls didn’t overlook those details. They wore heels to the damn bus stop.

They left in Francisco’s car. It took an hour and a half to get to the *tope*.

“Some friends y...*primos*? Cousins? Meeting us there.”

He’s letting me meet his family? Suzie remembered the last guy she’d been dating. After two years, he still thought bringing her around his family was “too much pressure.” Was this a big deal? Or just more proof that she was a *friend*?

Try not to think about it. You'll end up acting weird. They're just cousins.

When they arrived at the town center (which town? She didn't know. They all kind of looked alike, with a church and a park in the center, and shops and bars around the square), tents had been pitched to sell fried chicken, syrupy drinks with condensed milk, and *churros*. Some folks walked by selling lotto tickets, or some kind of meat bacon empanada.

They found a place to park in front of a *minisuper* along the main road. Some people were sitting in the back of pickup trucks, others had popped the hoods of their minivans open and sat in the back. Some had the foresight to bring beach chairs. Everyone had cups and *guaro*: *Flor de Caña*, *Imperial*, *Rock Ice*.

Suzie wrinkled her nose at the girls walking in and out of the *minisuper*. They bought chips, dried plantains flavored with sour cream, or mayonnaise to pour on top of their fries. How were they so thin and gorgeous? They made her cigarette jeans look like a tent. She looked at them: Skintight pants that were light on the butt cheeks and dark around the hips, corset tops with flannel patterns, black hair that was either pin straight or in tight curls, high-heeled boots, cowboy hats, and lipgloss, a purse, and nail polish to match their corset tops.

“The girls here sure are . . . dressed up.” Francisco parked and got out of the car. At first, she didn't think he even heard her.

“Yes,” Francisco opened the door on her side and helped her out. “Part of the good thing of the *tope*, lots of pretty girls. And I am with one.” He winked. “My cousins are waiting.”

What the hell was that? Suzie followed Francisco as he walked down the street. She smelled the horse smell: manure, hay, and something sweet, something like a rotten apple. She saw a couple of trucks roll by with horses in the back. *They must all be gathering all the horses*

somewhere down this road. She was trying not to think about the fact that Francisco had called her pretty.

Francisco's friends and cousins were sitting out the back of a green pickup truck. There was a middle-aged woman (a cousin?) with a thick black belt and a corset top. Her breasts leaked out of the top. They were high, shiny, with blue veins. She was loud, shouting something in Spanish with an *Imperial* in her hand. Two younger kids, presumably siblings, sat next to one another and played with their phones. A young, waif-like doll (who looked a bit like Francisco, but with a flatter nose) sat with a baby on her lap. Two men around Francisco's age drank and sat with their legs wide open.

Suzie heard their names but the sounds went right through her ears. She couldn't talk to them much, anyway. One of the fat men with his legs open walked towards Suzie and started to talk about his brothers in the United States. He was clearly drunk. He staggered, munched on chips, and didn't let Suzie get a word in. He spoke in Spanish, but Suzie could understand, more or less, what he said. *Mierda* was a pretty easy one to understand.

"The way I see it, I can eat shit here, or I can eat shit in the United States. But if I'm there, I have to work three times as hard to eat their shit. And shit is shit. Here, I work during the week, I drink my *guaro*, and every weekend I go to the beach with my family. My brothers wanted to be millionaires, so they went to the States. And they are still eating shit. To this day! I promise, they are all eating shit."

Suzie laughed and realized she was starting to get tipsy herself.

She heard cheers and looked down the street. The horses had started coming. Police led the charge. Some riders had had shinier coats, more expensive saddles. Some trotted sideways, or

lifted their knees up high, or seemed to dance. Suzie turned down beer after beer. It wasn't even two yet, and she felt tipsy.

The parade of horses was beautiful. Then she saw a short one, a donkey with an old man. He had a necklace made of garlic. Francisco said he was from Purriscal. "He comes to all the *topes*. Come, to take a picture!"

Francisco motioned for her to take a closer look as he stopped in front of them. He had coffee and onions hanging off the back, and a chicken standing on top of his cowboy hat.

Francisco held her hand and guided her up to the rub the donkey's nose. Then the old man picked the chicken up off his head and placed it on Suzie's.

"Oh my god! Oh my god!" She froze and tried to look up. Its talons dug into her hair and pushed down on her forehead. She closed her eyes and could hear the click of cameras. Then Francisco picked it up and gave it back to the old man, who put the chicken right back on top of his own head.

Clara didn't remember the ride back. A cop pulled them over and asked for their passports. She only had a copy of the photo page. That was intentional—She had overstayed her time in Costa Rica, and he couldn't tell that just from the copy of her photo. He knew that, and he knew that she knew that, and he scolded her a bit before letting them go. She wanted to scream, "I was just raped! And he did it!" But what good would that do? She wasn't even sure it was rape. Besides, if she made a claim like that, she would definitely have to come out with her passport, and they'd see she was here illegally, and then why would they believe her? "What are you doing in Costa Rica illegally, and with this old man? This *rich* old man? You just want him

to pay for the fine so you don't have to, and so you're saying he raped you." She was broke and beautiful, a jobless whore who couldn't cut it in America, so she'd come here.

She wouldn't say a thing, and Richard knew.

When they got back to Eliza's, Suzie wasn't there. Clara laid facedown on the bed for two hours. She jumped when a mango hit the roof and rolled to the ground. It rained a little, a sound that almost convinced her to sleep, under she heard an iguana's belly dragging on the ground outside.

Then, using a knife from the kitchen and the new razors she bought before her trip to the beach, Clara shaved her head. She collected the hair and brought it down to the small stream at the back of the property.

And she watched her blonde curls float away.

The horses rode up and down the street until sunset. Suzie ate some of that *cornmeatbacon*, whatever it was, and drank *guaro* until she could barely walk. Francisco's cousins let her sit on a horse and they guided it in a small circle. She laughed and almost fell off. Francisco helped her down and she gave his arm a squeeze.

When the sun started going down, everyone piled into the pickup and drove to a nearby ranch. A band was playing. They were selling more *guaro*. In front of the band, everyone was dancing. Through the green light radiating through the bandstand, Suzie registered rotating hips, cowboy hats, and cleavage.

"You dance *salsa*?" Suzie shook her head. "I'll show you. Is simple. Watch." Francisco then did some intricate hopping. She didn't expect a man that big to be so light on his feet.

“Oh yeah, *real* simple.” She tried to imitate his hopping and spun around. Her hair fell into her face. Then they were pressed against each other and she was kissing his cheeks. After a few minutes of blur, her knees buckled. She had too much to drink.

Briefly, she registered that Francisco was carrying her out of the ranch and putting her into his car. She felt him push the hair out of her face, and slept with a smile until they made it back to Eliza’s.

The next morning, Clara woke up and realized that Suzie had not come home. It was Monday morning, and Suzie hadn’t been at all last night. She almost wanted to be found—bald, ashamed, naked in bed. But it was just another silent, sunny morning like so many before it. She touched her head occasionally—She was still bald. Her bald head was the only evidence that what had happened had actually happened.

Clara remembered first time she had been with Sergio. It felt so different than her time with Richard. She had been in her studio brushing her wet hair. Her mascara collected in the emerging creases under her eyes.

Clara liked to keep the door propped open with her shoe to get some fresh air. She had taken a shower and forgotten it was open. And then there he was, covered in dirt, smelling like ripe mangoes and sweat, standing in her *villa* holding a coconut and a machete.

He saw she was wearing a towel. He looked into her eyes, a quick gesture to see if he needed to start apologizing. He did not.

Sergio put the coconut down and stuck the machete into its side. The blade made a smacking sound as it entered and Clara jumped, half in surprise, half in anticipation.

Clara held onto her towel as Sergio grabbed her hips, walked her backwards to the bed, and started kissing her neck. She sat on the bed and he knelt to kiss her mouth. He placed his hands on her knees and kept them there. He didn't move up, like she would have expected, but instead traced her kneecaps as they kissed. She moaned and pawed at his back for him to come closer, he nuzzled into her neck and growled.

That's how he decided they would have sex. Then he was on top of her, his pants undone, the door creaking as the wind blew it open. Where was Suzie? What if Eliza came by, or one of the other gardeners? She moaned louder and Sergio placed his hand over her mouth. He fingered her with his other hand, but not before tracing her thighs and petting the patch of fur, as if he was asking permission. Then he was on her, biting her ear, slipping in a bit at a time. Clara wondered why he didn't hurry, why he wasn't afraid of getting caught. She kept pawing at his back, trying to draw him in.

The memory was gone, replaced with rolls of Richard's tiny belly fat, his precum that looked a pale yellow, the grains of sand falling out of her hair with each half-hearted thrust. He hadn't touched her knees. He hadn't kissed her. He had put his dick in her, been disappointed, and then threw cash at her.

Clara found a knife in her kitchen but it wasn't sharp enough. She ran outside looking for Luis's machete. That would be sharp enough. She ran, crying, until she found Luis. He would know where it was. Sometimes he stuck it into the side of a tree, or slid it in that wagon he used to bring dead branches down to the river to burn.

When he found him, though, she couldn't ask him for it. He was trimming bushes around the pool since no one was swimming. His eyes became big and Clara vaguely remembered that

the last time Luis saw her, she had hair. Her baldness was already an intricate part of her identity, and she forgot that other people might be shocked at her appearance. Luis would not give a crying, bald girl a machete.

Just as fast, Clara ran away.

After he had left, Clara found Luis's machete. She went back into the studio and laid on the bed. She held it in her hands. She waited for Suzie. She wanted to cry in front of her. She wanted to be acknowledged somehow. She wanted to explain what had happened and know what Suzie thought.

Then she heard Suzie's laugh and Francisco's deep giggle and knew her friend was gone. Suzie never laughed like that. She wouldn't be back.

Clara cut her hand open with Luis's machete just to watch herself bleed. She didn't do it too deep. She didn't want to hit any bones or tendons. The feeling, the rush, the fact that the bleeding gash itself almost looked like a vagina—that was enough.

Clara entered a trance. She watched the blood fall from her hand onto the sheets. Would ants eat it? Would mosquitos be attracted to it? The blood flowed and then stopped. She hated that. The sun went down.

Clara bit the machete until she tasted blood in the corners of her lips. It felt like cutting a rubber balloon.

The machete fell and that's when Clara finally felt pain. She ran from the studio without any shoes on, without closing the door behind her. She went into the high grass towards the mango grove. Luis hadn't mowed that area that day, but she didn't care. If a snake bit her and she

died, at least then she would be respected. The snake would be put down and she would keep her virtue. She couldn't go to the police as an illegal, as an American girl looking for money. No one would care. If she died from a snakebite, then they would care.

She remembered an old movie—She never remembered the names. This one was religious. She had seen it playing at a nursing home her parents had forced her to volunteer in. A Christian girl in Rome was about to be gang raped. Her husband asked God to protect her. So God broke her neck before she could be raped. That was it. That was Clara's answer right there. God preferred virgins with broken necks over whores with broken hymens.

Clara found the large rock. It was supposed to be haunted. It was supposed to be spiritual. "Why are you haunted?" She demanded. She slapped it. Rough spots from the rock reopened her wound. She howled but stopped when she heard the rock howling with her. Its sound was deeper. Louder. It drowned her out. The rock looked at Clara and held her. She knelt. She sobbed. Then the energy of the rock invaded the top of her head. His presence in her mind was like a liquid blanket. She remembered having an upset stomach and swallowing the pink, cool ooze. The spirit of the rock got as far as her shoulders, and then Clara tensed. It stopped. They stayed that way for the rest of the night. Nothing bothered Clara as she slept—Not a snake, a mosquito, a speck of dirt.

Suzie and Francisco were eating chips and dipping them into flavored cream cheese. He was talking about the upcoming World Cup.

“We’re in the *grupo de la muerte*,” he explained. “We first play Uruguay, then England and Italy, or maybe Italy then England? But they are all so good. Costa Rica, will be lucky if we tie.”

“You don’t think they’re going to win?”

“No, *no hay chance*. Tie, maybe. Those big countries, they are just too good. We are not going to do absolutely nothing.”

Francisco’s studio looked like Suzie’s, but with different details—a painted feather, large coffee mugs, a smell like sawdust, coarse jeans, and ties hanging on the fan. His studio had one large crack in the kitchen wall, and black ants walked in and out.

They talked until Suzie started to fall asleep in her own hands. Suzie assured him that it would be all right if they slept in the same bed. He gave her both pillows and slept at the edge.

Clara woke up when the haunted rock started to get warm. She looked around. Her arms were covered in goosebumps. Luis had not yet come to work. The sun was just coming up.

She noticed a cluster of rocks around the haunted one. They formed a semicircle.

Clara stood up and slipped on a rotten mango. It exploded in a mess of brown slush and worms. Her feet were bare. Her hand throbbed.

Clara knew that two days ago, she would have jumped and squealed at the maggots. She would have hit them, her shoulders would bunch together like bananas wrapped in plastic, and she would have showered immediately, and maybe she would have had the sensation that the worms were in her hair. But this Clara, the Clara of today, the whore Clara—She didn’t mind the maggots crawling on her skin and looking for new soft flesh.

The maggots didn't want her yet. She wasn't dead. They fell off, passive, into the dirt. Clara looked at her hand and the vaginal *bloodgash*. She thought about helping the maggots, picking them up and placing them into her wounds.

Clara stared at the haunted rock and wondered why it howled. She walked back to the studio. Suzie wasn't there. She fell asleep face-down.

Chapter 6: Employee Relations II

After less than two weeks of her working there, Eliza asked Estrella and Esperanza to move into the kitchen. They arrived on Sunday, June eighth.

Eliza really wanted Luis to move in so she could have a man around, but he had his own house. Eliza knew from him that Estrella didn't have a real house. Estrella was happy with the arrangement and agreed the minute Eliza mentioned it. Luis agreed to build some walls and shelves to make it look less like a kitchen and more like a home. In return, Estrella would start cooking breakfast for the guests, mainly *gallo pinto* with eggs.

Estrella didn't discuss this with her daughter, or even give her the courtesy of a warning. Esperanza woke up that Sunday to find all of her clothes missing, her makeup thrown into the garbage.

“We're moving to Eliza's.”

“Can't I at least see my friends today? To say goodbye?”

“No. We're leaving now.”

The bus ride was a trance and some tears. Esperanza had spent her childhood in Santa Ana watching condos overtake rusty metal rooftops. Her tiny house was constructed with the engineering of a card house. But still, it was easy for Esperanza to see her other friends in Santa Ana, mainly Laura. It was easy for her to get to San Jose, to *Multiplaza*. Eliza's place was in the

middle of *nowhere*. And now she would need to take at least two buses to see any of her friends, and the last bus back left at nine. *Nine*.

Besides, she didn't have to invite anyone to her shitty house. Esperanza kept her black VOLCOM cap clean. She cleaned her sneakers with a toothbrush. With enough black eyeliner, no one would know she was poor. But now, at Eliza's, she would be isolated.

When I'm old enough, I will leave and never come back. I'll go to college and never come back. She remembered when she first realized she hated her mother, when she first decided she would leave forever.

She had been four. She had had what felt like a swollen tongue. The back of her mouth wouldn't move. She couldn't swallow and started eating only milk through a straw so she could deposit the liquid directly into her throat. She didn't have to swallow, she could let it trickle. The coolness was soothing, followed by even sharper pain.

Finally, Estrella took her to a doctor when her cheeks started to swell. The doctor had opened her mouth and pressed her tongue down with a flat stick, and then something on the right side ripped open like a jacket being unzipped. He immediately called a nearby nurse. They set Esperanza back into a chair and used tubes to suck out puss and clean her wounds. Once they fixed the right side, they did the left, which was also swollen with puss.

"How often do you brush her teeth?" The doctor had asked.

"Isn't she supposed to do that?! She's old enough!"

The doctor, stunned, gave Estrella explicit directions on how to brush her daughter's teeth. He gave her toothpaste and toothbrushes. Then he explained that Esperanza would have to come back two or three times to remove all of her baby teeth. They were already rotted through.

"Can't you do it all now?" Estrella was thinking about all the work she was going to miss.

"No, ma'am. The risk of infection is too high. We are going to set the appointments up now. I think we should also inform you that if you miss an appointment, or if her oral hygiene doesn't improve, we're going to contact the authorities."

"Authorities?! For what?!"

"For neglect, ma'am."

That was the only time anyone had ever intervened on Esperanza's behalf. She had a name for that thing her mother did to her: neglect. From that moment on, Brushing and flossing became her biggest joys. Estrella complained throughout the next two appointments, but she took her. Her adult teeth came in strong and white.

Their bus reached San Jose, and Estrella and Esperanza filed out and carried their luggage through the Coca-Cola district towards the Atenas bus. They were located near the same stop, right in front of a patch of vendors selling old empanadas, stale sandwiches, Bamboo, Red Bull and its cheaper counterpart, MAXX.

Estrella made Esperanza start cleaning as soon as their luggage was in the kitchen. She started with the bathroom by the two swimming pools. No one used them, so they weren't ever really dirty, but they sometimes had a mildewy smell and cobwebs in the corners. She put on a playlist on her phone and turned up the volume. Foo Fighters, Iggy Azalea, and David Guetta. She didn't play anything in Spanish.

When I graduate and I'm up there giving my speeches and they ask me who I want to thank, I will never say my mom. My mom will wait and wait and wait for it. But I will never thank

her. For what? For calling me lazy? For hating that I was born? For never taking me to the dentist? For not even knowing that she was supposed to brush my teeth?

Sweater Vest was coming June twelfth. The day before, Eliza set out to clean a room for him. Usually, Sweater Vest only came from December until May. Eliza suspected he was having trouble with his marriage on account of his alcoholism, which had aged his wife faster than it had aged him. The strange time of his visit, and the fact that he wanted a standard and not one of the larger one-bedrooms clued her in. He was coming alone.

Eliza always stored some of Sweater Vest's things: his radio, a massage table, books, a fan, winter coats, and the Christmas lights he liked to hang around his house. Eliza always had to charge Sweater a little more because of the way he used electricity. He used Christmas lights, electric lamps and torches, let his fan run all day, kept lights on when he left the house, and had to sleep with the TV on. He put his freezer on the coldest setting, and then the door froze shut. He would have "eat outs" where he would cook everything in his freezer because he had to turn it off completely just to open the door.

Another couple wanted to stay in the poolside suite for just a weekend. She had to sweep in there. Eliza liked to make sure the sheets were flat, the curtains were open, the towels smelled like bleach, the spiderwebs were swept out, the drawers were free from black ants, the toilets flushed properly, the stove turned on, the fans worked, the coffee pot was clean, the trash cans were empty, and the light bulbs worked. It was so ugly to have someone at the gate when a room

wasn't ready. That happened only twice, both times when Pancho or Lalo took a reservation and forgot to tell her about it.

Estrella did an all right job cleaning, but in business, she long learned that no one would do a better job than her. No one would count the money as accurately or fold the blankets so neatly.

She swept Sweater Vest's standard. He would stay next to Clara and Suzie. Sweat gathered on her face. She felt thirsty. A sour taste came out of the back of her throat, a taste like she had eaten a bucket of *momones chinos*. The doctor said that was the diabetes. It made you taste sugar. It was supposed to make you tired, but Eliza didn't know if she was tired because of the diabetes or if she was tired because she was tired.

At four, Eliza fixed up some coffee and cookies for Luis.

"Eliza, do you know if Manuel is coming back from the States soon?"

Eliza swallowed a sigh.

"He's going for all of June, and probably July. He likes to go during the rainy season. It's summer there. Why?"

"It's Eugenia. She hasn't paid me yet, and I would feel more comfortable asking Manuel."

"They haven't paid you?"

"It's not that much of a problem." This was a lie.

"You need to ask that lady. It will be okay. You have no problem talking to me about money."

“It’s not the same,” Luis said. “She’s not the same.” Eugenia seemed to hate everything about him—his skin color, his nationality, and his very, very complete lack of interest in her sexually. “I don’t mean to scare you, but that lady wants to do something to you. I think it’s witchcraft.”

“Oh please. I have things to do. I don’t have time for that. Isn’t she a Catholic, though?”

“That doesn’t matter. Some people twist all the religions together. She does not like you. She told me that I had to decide. I could either work for you, or work for her.”

“What did you say?”

“I work for her one day a week and she doesn’t pay me. Of course I picked you. You hire me full time. You’re sponsoring me. I didn’t even have to think about it.”

“So are you going to work there at all?”

“If they pay me. I don’t know if I’m going there this Sunday.” Luis swallowed his coffee in two gulps. A loud cricket made a song like sand rubbing against his blood. He liked the space here, the freedom to work without being watched. Luis remembered Eugenia’s big legs, her high wedges, the way she looked at him.

Luis didn’t consider himself an attractive man, and he was not used to this level of attention. His main attributes were that he was a hard worker, and thin. He had a crooked nose that he didn’t remember breaking, but his siblings insisted that yes, he had. His veins and muscles could be seen in his long arms. He did not have that V-shape women seemed to love. He was a muscular piece of asparagus. His clothes were always dirty, always second-hand. Sometimes he wore a camouflage jacket. Yet now he had all this female attention.

It must be God’s way of testing me while my own wife is sick.

Eliza nodded. “Take tomorrow off, Luis. I’ll pay you. You’re working too hard. I can see it in the way you’re moving. Your neck hurts, your back hurts.”

Luis blinked. Was he in pain? He’d have to take her word for it. Every time he wondered if he was in pain, he was assured that he was not, simply because he knew his wife was in more pain.

“If you say so, Doña Eliza. Have you seen the American girl? *La macha*? Clara?”

“No, why?”

“I don’t know, but she cut all her hair off. I wasn’t just sick. She really did it.”

“She—What?”

“She cut her hair off.”

Eliza shrugged and held up her hands. “I had no idea. That is so strange, though. She had such pretty hair.”

“Such pretty hair, yes.”

They finished their coffees, and Luis left to take the bus home. He locked the gate behind him and looked back briefly for Clara. What would make such a pretty girl cut off all her hair? She had been crying. She had the same feverish panic that only women had. Some men thought women were weaker. Luis didn’t think that. Physically, yes, girls were not as strong. When it came to pain, though, they felt more. They seemed manic because they had a higher capacity to feel everything in the natural world. All that could overrun their senses and drive them mad. That’s why they needed men to help them.

Luis waited by the soccer field for the bus to Alajuela. He took the local from Turrucarens into Alajuela and then walked. He needed to talk to his wife tonight.

They had received her results the day before. The doctors recommended that Luis do everything to make Merlin “comfortable.” That meant pillows, painkillers. But there was no surgery, no drug that would make it better.

“If we had caught this a year ago, maybe.”

After he heard the news, he tried to remain calm in front of Merlin. He had waited until he was alone at Eliza’s before he punched a hole in a wall. It was in his storage room, so no one could see, and he could pretend it was an accident.

That night, Merlin announced her decision to go home to Nicaragua, and she wanted to take the children.

“Please,” Luis begged Merlin. “Let me keep them. Things are better here for them. They’ll go to good schools.”

“I don’t want to be separated from my children.”

“You might be dying, Merlin.” He made sure not to use any certain terms. She would fall apart. “And if you’re over there and something happens, what is going to happen to my children? We need to get everything in order. They’re almost old enough that they’ll be in school and we don’t need to watch them during the day. Merlin, please. Please don’t take my sons back there. We worked so hard to be here. I worked so hard.”

“And if I leave them? Who will take care of them? It’s at least another two years before the younger one can go to school.”

“I can move into Eliza’s. There’s space in the kitchen. The maid already lives there with her daughter.” Luis could fix it up. He could set up a partition wall and build a few beds so

Estrella and Esperanza wouldn't have to share the cot that was there now. "They can stay there. Estrella, Esperanza and I can take turns watching him. And he will have plenty of space to walk around."

"Who is this woman? I'm not dead yet, and you're already replacing me?"

"I'm not replacing you. I'm just trying to think of the best solution for the kids."

"Once you live with this woman, you'll start sleeping with her. You'll have the kids and a new wife and you won't need me anymore. Just like you did with your *first* wife."

That hurt. She knew what to say to hurt him. He swallowed. She was sick, and so she was mean. He couldn't react because then the fight would be about something else entirely, and he had to keep it about his sons and their future.

"That was a completely different situation."

"Is it?"

"Merlin, what do you want me to do? You're sick. You want to go back home. I understand. If you want to stay here and find a doctor, I will help you. It will take a long time, but we can try. But no, I do not want my sons going back there, especially with you being sick. They're Costa Rican, Merlin. You're not, and your mother is not. Do you know how complicated this could be if you really *are* that sick? And we're not legally married. I would have no idea what to do."

Her words were still hurting him. Maybe she was right. This was what happened with his first wife. Didn't life operate in a cycle, though? Did that make him terrible?

He didn't know.

“You just sound so . . . like your mind is made up. Like you’re not even upset. I can’t control when I go to the *bathroom* anymore, Luis. Do you know how hard this has been? And you just see everything . . . you’re out to survive. In your mind, there’s no time to be sad. Don’t you ever just want to *feel* something sometimes, Luis, even if it’s sadness?”

As she spoke, memories of his mother started to leak in. She would mess herself and cry. She didn’t want to wear diapers and be changed like a baby, but she had no choice. She didn’t like her daughters and sons seeing her privates, but she had no choice. The last few years of her life were a constant moan, one long complaint, the agony of a mother unable to care for her children or for herself.

Luis put his face in his hands and sat down. He remembered hearing about an educated Nicaraguan who had gone in for a desk job, only to be told that they were only hiring Costa Ricans for that position. He didn’t know why that stuck out in his head, except maybe because he imagined his own sons applying for jobs, presenting their *cedulas*, and the employer looking at their round, brown faces and wondering if they were “really” *Nicas*.

He lifted his head. Merlin saw his tears. He looked like a bright flower at dawn, shaking off dew. “Merlin, of course I’m upset. I’m trying to handle everything so it’s at least somewhat easy for our children.”

She acquiesced; she had wanted to make sure she would be missed. Merlin would go to Nicaragua. A neighbor would watch the kids while Luis took her there, since she wasn’t really well enough to take the bus herself. Then Luis would come back and they would act like Merlin was on a trip. That wasn’t too strange. She had been on trips a lot of times. And then she would either get better and return, or die and not return.

Luis had to think about it in simple terms or he would freeze. He couldn't freeze, because then he might never move again.

Eliza gave Luis a few days off. She knew Merlin was sick, she didn't know how sick. She went into his storage room and got some matches so she could burn some things. She didn't want the back to be a mess when he came back.

Luis's storage room contained lawn mowers, extra parts, extra lumber, a rifle and a pistol, machetes of all lengths, a stick with a machete tied to the end, sandpaper, oil, rags, gasoline, the cart he pushed around and carried fruit and leaves in.

Eliza grabbed matches and some old newspaper and headed down to the creek. Eliza threw leaves from the cart into the flame and watched them burn. They went out so fast. They became nothing so fast.

From behind the fire, Eliza thought she heard something else crackle, something like a shoe on dry leaves. She squinted, but couldn't see past the fire, which was now higher than her head.

It was probably just the fire. No one else came so far down.

Eliza came back up to find the phone ringing. It was her son Lalo.

"So, Ma, are people going nuts over the World Cup?"

"Yes, yes. The first game is Saturday, *contra Uruguay*."

"Oh man, I really hope Costa Rica wins."

“The odds are not in our favor, but I hope we do something. Even if we just tie, there will be a huge party. So how are you doing, kiddo?”

“All right. You know, this might sound strange, but Dad was wondering if you can give next month’s payment to . . . Eugenia.”

“What? Why can’t you just pay him? He’s right there.”

“Yeah, but then he has to wire the money to Eugenia. That takes time, and costs some money.”

“Why doesn’t he just bring it back with him when he comes next month?”

“Apparently, Eugenia needs the money now. Since she lives right there, it’s just easier for you to pay her. She kind of needs the money.”

Eliza remembered Luis mentioning that he hadn’t been paid, and how Merlin was sick. She put her head in her hands. Another payment that large so soon would hurt. That was basically all of the money Richard had given her.

“It’s not even time for me to pay yet! I already gave him money for June. That would be for July.”

“I know, Ma, but do you think maybe you could give it to her, you know, in advance? I can wire it to you. It’s just that Dad is too embarrassed.”

“I don’t even know what that lady looks like. I could be next to her in church and have no idea.”

“Please, Ma?”

“Fine. She can come by today around two.”

“Thanks, Ma. You know, Dad is really going crazy with the money. He hasn’t even been here for a week and credit card offers keep coming in. I don’t even know why they approve him.”

“So you want me to give his wife money, and now you’re telling me how he’s spending it all shopping?”

“I don’t mean it like that, Ma. I’ll have him call Eugenia and let her know to come by around two.”

I’m not going to open the gate for her, Eliza thought. I’ll just come out and hand her the money in an envelope.

Eliza was upstairs watching TV when she arrived. Eugenia pulled up to the gate at one-thirty. Then she flashed her lights. Then she honked. Once. Twice.

Eliza opened the gate halfway and stepped towards the truck. Eugenia rolled down the window and let her hand dangle out. Eliza tried to say something—Eugenia wouldn’t have it. She grabbed the envelope and threw the truck into reverse. Eugenia couldn’t even see her face—She wore large shades. Her lips were pressed together and she had short, unnaturally blonde hair.

Then she was gone. She pulled out without saying a word. Eliza locked the gate.

Chapter 7: Price of Paradise II

Over the next two weeks, Suzie waited for Clara to explain her shaven head, her weepy face, the bandage around her hand. Clara wouldn't answer any questions. She watched those crime shows on a loop. Clara only spoke to Suzie to hand her a ball of rolled up bills for June's rent. It was in a combination of dollars and *colones*. Eliza had counted it.

“It's just about enough. It will be enough if I go to the bank on a day when the exchange rate is better. Don't worry, Suzie.”

Eliza didn't see Clara outside anymore. She had loved lounging by the pool, and now she never came out except when she had to get a pizza delivery from the gate. Richard would still come up to the communal kitchen area to use the wifi; he had to. She saw him and decided that she would ask about what happened when him and Clara went to the beach. She knew they had left and come back together—She saw everything from her window.

Eliza wiped down the communal kitchen and started to boil water. She liked to put out sugar water for the hummingbirds, but the water had to be boiled first. Richard had his tablet and was huffing and sighing.

“You really need better Internet, Eliza. I have a friend, he could have an antenna here. It's from Russia, or something. You'll get signal across the whole place. I won't even charge you for it.”

“If you want to set that up, go right ahead. As long as everyone still has Internet. I don't understand the fascination with those machines, anyway.”

“It's a giant tube. We would just have just have to put it . . . maybe near the path. The one that goes down to the rock. It has to receive the signal, and then broadcast it over the property.”

“All right.”

“Next week. I’ll have it. You’ll see.”

“I’m sure it will work fine. Have you seen Clara?”

“What? Who?”

“The blonde American girl. She stays in one of the studios.”

“Don’t know her.”

“Oh, yes you do. You went to the beach just last weekend. Remember?”

“Oh. Right. No, I haven’t seen her since then. You want to see some pictures of when I was younger? I was pretty good-looking.”

Eliza turned the stove off so the water could cool. She poured sugar into the pot and walked over to Richard. He was skinny, but without muscle tone. She looked at the screen.

“Oh yes. You were! We all were, weren’t we? Like they say, there’s no such thing as ugly people, just old people and poor people.” Eliza laughed, but she hadn’t forgotten Richard’s strange responses to her question. Richard kept scrolling through photos. Eliza caught a glimpse of a photo of a photo. Richard swiped faster.

“Wait! What was that? Was that you?”

“No, that was my—son.” He swiped back. The man did look a lot like Richard. Handsomer, even, but with a bad haircut.

“You have a son?” Richard had never mentioned a son, just his wife and daughter. Eliza found this bizarre. A father who did not talk about his son—that was a bad sign.

“Yes. He’s dead.”

“I’m so sorry.” She touched his arm.

“Not *dead* dead, but his mind is gone. He might as well be dead. Schizophrenic, like his mother. He lives in a facility now.”

Eliza didn't say anything. Richard continued anyway.

“His mother didn't respond to shock treatment. Neither did he. Finally, I stopped wasting my money on those procedures. Some people just want to be sick. If I wasn't rich enough to fund his mental illness, he probably would have snapped out of it long ago.” Eliza could tell by the way he said the last sentence that he had said it many times. She imagined him saying it as a joke to other well-off businessmen.

“I'm sure you did the best you could.” Eliza was good at staying neutral in front of her guests.

“Do you believe in that, Eliza? In schizophrenia? You're a more traditional lady. You probably feel the same way I do.”

“I don't know if tradition has anything to do with it. There have always been people who don't fit inside society just right. As long as he is in a place where he isn't hurting himself, and he has a chance to get better, that's all that matters.” She didn't feel that way at all. The idea of a young man locked up when he should be in school, making friends, going out with a nice girl, deciding on a career— it was almost too much to bear, especially when his own father was so nonchalant about throwing him away.

“He's never coming out, Eliza. Like I said, it's like he's dead.”

“You never know, Richard. Just have faith, and you never know.”

Eliza excused herself. She had to pull weeds and get the dead leaves out of the chicken coop before the afternoon rain. And she had a bad feeling.

When you open that gate, you never know what you're going to get.

Suzie spent more time with Francisco. She thought her freelance work would suffer, but she actually just started managing her time better. Her income didn't dip at all.

One Saturday, Suzie woke up to find Francisco's side of the bed empty. She got up and saw his car was still there. After a walk, she found him pacing around the mango groves. It was six in the morning.

"You have to wear a red shirt!" Francisco was suddenly very irrational. He was wearing the oldest, most tattered jersey Suzie had ever seen. She didn't want to say anything, but he was a little too chubby for it. Suzie remembered: It was the day of Costa Rica's first game. Francisco wanted to take Suzie to the main park in Alajuela, where a large TV was set up in the square. Costa Rica was playing Uruguay.

"I don't know if I can go out." She had paid for June, but barely, and now she was worried about July.

He absolutely insisted that she watch the game. Estrella cooked eggs and *pinto* and they ate by the bar. She came by when they were almost done with some cheese, corn tortillas, and coffee.

Then Suzie found a red shirt, belted it, and wore black tights and the boots she had worn to the *tope*. She had slowly been moving her clothes and toiletries over to Francisco's studio, usually when Clara was either asleep or pretending to sleep.

They drove into Alajuela, parked, and walked to the park in the center of the city. A large statue of Juan Santamaria was in one corner of the plaza.. On one side, they were selling pizza and sandwiches out of tents. Everyone struggled to find a spot in the shade where they could still see the large screen.

Everyone had on a red jersey. Police were stopping people from bringing alcohol, which only prompted people to show up with containers of orange juice that were probably filled with vodka. Suzie had never seen a full soccer game, she was ashamed to say. Everyone had plastic inflatable tubes with a picture of a frog on it. *Kolbi*, they said. Suzie vaguely recognized it as one of the cell phone companies.

“Our goalie, he is very good,” Francisco explained. “He is the best in all of Spain.”

“If he’s from Spain, why is he playing here?”

“When it’s the World Cup, you come back to your home country. He is from Costa Rica. His club is in Spain. His name is Navas. Keylor Navas.”

They sat in the back of the park and watched the screen.

“Uruguay, they say they will win us. They call us *Costa Pobre* instead of Costa Rica. Like, poor us.”

The square started to fill up. Women dressed their children up in red jerseys; some were wearing black. Babies in strollers waved or chewed on Costa Rican flags.

When the game started, no one breathed. Uruguay scored quickly, and the crowd cursed. A few left. They started shouting at the players like they could hear them through the screen.

“Maybe we can tie. Come on, just tie!” Francisco looked like he was about to start crying. Suzie was afraid to even hug him.

At halftime, Francisco was inconsolable. He didn't want to eat or drink. Suzie tried to find him a soda, but none of the stores nearby had the kind he liked.

Almost immediately after the second half started, Costa Rica scored. The park began to chant.

“oooEEEoooEEE, ticooooooooos, ticooooooooos!”

They hadn't finished the chant when Costa Rica scored yet another goal. One lady fell to her knees. A group of men who had been drinking “orange juice” started blowing horns and wearing the Costa Rican flag as a cape.

These people are crazy, Suzie thought.

Then Costa Rica scored again. Suzie started to notice cars driving around the park waving the Costa Rican flag out the window. Everyone was honking their horns. As the game came to a close, Suzie smelled marijuana in the park. The cops were also celebrating and laughing with each other. They didn't seem to be bothered with the smell of weed or the public displays of drunkenness.

In the extra time, one of the Uruguayan players kicked Campbell. The crowd started throwing their middle fingers in the air and chanting.

“A LA POOTAH, A LA POOTAH...”

Suzie saw even a little old lady with her middle finger in the air.

And then the game was over. Everyone in the park began to walk in the street with their flags on their backs. Somehow the amount of flags and girls wearing belly shirts multiplied over the course of the game. Cars drove in circles and honked their horns. One of the drunk guys with the horn climbed up onto the Juan Santamaria statue in the center of the square and started

waving his flag. A pickup truck filled with shirtless men pulled up and people started climbing up into the bed of the pickup and shouting.

“We won! We won!” Francisco planted kisses all over Suzie. She laughed. She had never seen a soccer game before, but everyone’s spirit was infectious. “We won!” Suzie took out her phone and took a photo of the crowd to show Clara, if Clara decided to open her eyes today.

Luis could tell from the cheering in the street and the shots fired in the air that Costa Rica must have won. He smiled as he worked. It wasn’t going to rain today. He started making more bars for Eliza’s house and for the poolside suite. He would work up to the standards.

Pancho called right after the game was over. Eliza was still wiping sweat off her forehead.

“Pancho! Did you see that?!”

“That was amazing, Ma. I can’t believe they won. Is the country losing its mind?”

“Are you kidding? People are going to be drinking until the next game.”

“I wish I was there. Ma, do you know what’s going on with Dad?”

“You and your brother both. I don’t know what your father does, Pancho.”

“He’s apparently cleaned out after that carbon offsets thing.”

“That—what?”

“Well, long story short, it was a scam. They’re out a lot of money. Lalo had to send Dad some cash just to keep their son in school.” He always said *their son* and not *my brother*. Pancho and Lalo didn’t feel connected to Manuel’s new wife or kid.

“I didn’t know all that. Besides, if they have those issues, Eugenia and Manuel can do this old-fashioned thing called working. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“For my dad to go down there with all that money and then go back to working for someone else? It would be too humiliating. You know how he is.”

“*Ay Pancho*, but it doesn’t matter! If you don’t have it, then you have to go to work! Maybe he should stop talking so much about what he has and about how much money he makes, and then it wouldn’t be such a big deal. And what did you want me to say?”

“I don’t know, Ma. You know, I think he still loves you.”

“So?”

There was a pleading silence.

“Oh, Pancho. You know I’m never going to be with your father again.”

“I know, Ma.”

They went back to talking about the business. Pancho wanted to charge higher rates.

“And stop giving the *ticos* a different price. They need to pay the same amount as everyone else.”

“What we charge is cheap for Americans,” she said. “Not for Costa Ricans. It’s far too much for that little house.”

“If they can’t pay, then they can’t stay.”

“But then I make nothing. Something is better than nothing. Otherwise, what, my little houses sit empty.”

“It’s the principle, Ma.”

Eliza stopped arguing with him. She was just going to do what she wanted anyway. She had to pay people, to pay Manuel. She wasn't going to turn away people like Francisco or the couple who had come the week before. And it certainly wasn't her fault that Manuel lost all of his money. They talked about the game some more and got off the phone.

Her sons both had a strange way of seeing their father. To them, he had built up his businesses alone. Manuel had always been a hard worker, but he was terrible with money, and not very prudent. He had one idea and would need to act on it immediately. She remembered when they first started the HVAC business, before they had kids, back when her hair was still long and black. She would count the money and pay the electric, and buy the equipment they needed, and put some money in the bank, and all of a sudden Manuel would ask her for some extra money to buy a walk-in box, to invest in a fishing company, or some other far-fetched idea. Eliza created another bank account and another set of books so he couldn't impulsively go to the bank and withdraw it all. She did that so the kids could go to private school, so they could save up to buy a house, and eventually buy their land in Costa Rica. He had worked hard, but they had worked hard together.

Now that they weren't together, it was becoming more apparent who was more business-minded, but Pancho and Lalo still worshipped their father. It was a good impulse, she guessed, but recently Pancho seemed angry at his father for not being as successful as he once was, for getting old and out of touch.

Clara had started to lose weight, and she hadn't gotten her period. Her hair had started growing back. She hated that. She hated that time was passing. She hated that no one was really checking on her, not even Suzie.

Her hand was getting better. She didn't need to wrap it up anymore. She didn't want to, anyway. It was too hard to keep a bandage around a hand. It wanted to bend too often.

Clara didn't want to go outside for fear that she would see Richard again. It wasn't just about him—It was something else. She was remembering other things, but she wasn't even sure if they had happened.

It was her time in the jungle, just before she came here. She remembered flashes.

Being at a bus stop with a small puppy, holding the puppy and laughing as it licked her face.

Hugging a box during a long bus ride, trails of vomit and snot coming out of her nose.

Cooking dinner for everyone, and paying for the groceries on her credit card.

Laughing around a campfire, kissing a girl, vomiting at dawn, hearing one of the yoga instructors talk about the benefits of throwing up.

“Like if you eat something bad, like a piece of cake. You can just throw up and get it out of your system. But open your mouth wide so the acid doesn't destroy the enamel on your teeth.”

There had been a man with a gun, she was pretty sure. On a rainy night. She remembered slippery green leaves and a deep night sky. She remembered a turtle three meters long laying eggs, and someone using a red flashlight so they could see.

“The white light hurts them,” someone had said. The turtle laid her eggs and then they drank. The water was rough and shark-infested. The sharks were attracted to the struggling baby turtles.

Then there had been a canoe, alcohol, and stars. Clara was in the canoe with a man. They weren't in the rough ocean—It was a canal in the middle of the forest. She had thought he was cute, mysterious. He never spoke about himself, but he seemed educated. Ivy League. Artistic. Not like those military types who saw her free life and yearned to instill order and boundaries.

The boat was rocking. The man who was rowing had insisted on not using the motor. Too much sound would wake people up, and disturb the animals.

“I came here to do penance for what I did. My sister and I worked together. She looks young. Very young. She would go to the mall, to wherever, and find these girls. They'd become friends. She'd show them around to the best bars.” Something had clicked in the bushes. He had stopped rowing.

“You're so pretty.”

They did shots in the dark. She remembered that the canoe had started to rotate, and she felt dizzy. Did she know he had a gun? No, not at that point. It was just them and the canoe. That part was nice.

“What did your sister do?”

“She would get them to the bars, get them to come out, and after a few times, they would. . . she'd give them something to make them fall asleep. I'd help her put them into my truck. We took their IDs, and I brought them somewhere else. I'm not sure where they went. I would just hand over the truck with the girl inside, and get it back the next day.”

“What are you talking about?”

He was crying at that point. Clara realized they were far away from land. She reached for the oars. He grabbed them.

“You’re not going to tell anyone.”

“I won’t.”

“You can’t tell anyone.”

“Where is your sister now?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

Clara had an idea. She started to laugh.

“Why are you so serious? You’re so weird. How drunk *are* you, anyway?”

“Yeah? You’re drunk?”

“*Duh.*”

He looked at her, confused, then grabbed her hair and forced his tongue down her throat. She was repulsed for a second, then pulled him towards her. The boat rocked too hard. They both slipped over the side. Clara remembered the crocodiles hiding in the mangroves. She came up and gasped for air. She swallowed water.

She couldn’t see the canoe. She couldn’t see anything. She started to swim in a direction, any direction.

A hand grabbed her arm. She thought it was a jaw. She recognized that red light, the turtle light. It was someone else, a man with a wide face and dark skin. She recognized him as a friend. He pulled her into his canoe and later pulled in the other man.

The wide-faced man gave Clara his coat and a life vest, and rowed back to land.

Later that night, Clara started to sneeze. The air was cold. Her hair refused to dry. There was only one bar in the whole town they were in, a warehouse on the edge of the canal called *La Culebra*. She had gone with the group to get some drinks there, and the man she had been in the canoe with was also there. She tried not to watch him, but found that she kept locking eyes with him.

He knows. He knows I wasn't really that drunk. He knows that I still remember. He knows.

When everyone had gone to sleep, Clara stayed awake in her tent. They were supposed to wake up at dawn and do more vomiting by the river.

She didn't hear anything.

Maybe he went to sleep.

That night, Francisco was high off the win and drunk off *guaro*. They got back to Eliza's around ten after going to his cousin's house in San Pedro.

Suzie changed—She still didn't feel completely comfortable getting dressed around him, but she was getting better with it.

They got under the blankets together.

"How long are you here?"

"I don't know. I need to check my passport. I have to go back in July. Late July."

"Yes, but you can come back. It's just three days." He made a three. He used his thumb and first two fingers to make threes. "Then you can come back."

"Why would I come back?"

"To stay with me."

She laughed.

"I'm serious."

"I know. That's why it's funny. I can't stay here. I have to go back. Find a job . . ."

"You can find a job here. I know a teacher. You can teach."

"Francisco, I can't just stay here forever."

"Okay. We talk more later."

That was just Francisco's way of stopping Suzie from fretting. She had realized that by now. He would *say* they would talk about it later, but she knew he was just going to plan a long weekend in Nicaragua and then take her with him, and then take her back, and then her passport would have a new stamp and she could stay for another three months. And then she would have no reason to hurry back to the United States.

Suzie sighed. She felt annoyed.

“Well, maybe you’re just with me because you want a green card!”

Suzie wished she could put the words back into her mouth as soon as she said them.

“Because *what?* I *what?*”

“Nothing! I didn’t mean that. I didn’t mean it. I was just annoyed.”

“Susanna, *you came here.* You came here. You came *here.*” He kept shaking his head, muttering to himself in Spanish and struggling to find the right words in English to express all of his rage and frustration. “I *like* you, Susanna.” She hated hearing him say her name. It just filled her with more shame. Why had she said something so stupid and untrue?

“I want to be with you because I actually *want to be with you.*”

She was still annoyed, but softened. She kissed his cheek, rested her head on his chest, and fell asleep.

Maybe living here wouldn’t be so bad, she thought.

Chapter 8: Eliza's Used to Be Fun (and So Were You)

Over the next two weeks, Costa Rica beat Italy and tied England to come out at the top of their group. There were parties every night. Eliza found it hard to go to the bank because there were simply no employees there. Parents took vacations and let their kids off school. It was even on the news that the nation was running out of *guaro* and beer.

The joy was infectious. Aside from their little spat, Francisco and Suzie were falling even faster in love. And the energy, the fun in the air, the way Francisco's family got together to watch a game, only seemed to accelerate the process. Suzie didn't remember the last time she didn't worry about money, or the last time getting to know someone felt so easy. And Costa Ricans were fun drunks. They just wanted to dance and listen to music, sit at the beach and talk about whether or not they believed in witchcraft:

“How else do you explain when an ugly girl marries a handsome man?” Francisco's cousin, the one who had ranted about eating shit, said during one of these philosophical discussions.

Belle started following Esperanza around the property. Eliza was worried about the girl: She wore open-toed sandals in the high grass down by the mango groves. There could be snakes down there. The neighbors grew corn, and snakes loved corn.

Esperanza didn't mind the company. She would rather be with her friends, but if she had to, she would talk to the little American girl. It beat sleeping on that cot with her mother in the kitchen, or talking to her mother in general. Belle didn't speak much Spanish, but they played

hide-and-seek, and she taught the little girl Poker. Poker was actually easy to teach without words because of the pictures on cards.

When Estrella was cooking *pinto*, Belle would help Esperanza serve people at the bar. She would sit on one of the stools and spin while Esperanza cleaned up the kitchen. (Luis noticed that the bar had fresh dents from Belle's spinning.) Once Esperanza was done, they would play games, climb trees, catch frogs after the afternoon rain. Esperanza thought she was a little too old for it, but no one in her school had to know.

The day after Costa Rica beat Uruguay, Esperanza had to help her mother. Again.

Esperanza went up to the big house to get the mop and chlorine for her mother. Richard was sitting on his porch in his bathing suit. A roll of fat slid over the top of the drawstring. His door was open, his curtains were closed.

"Esperanza!" She looked up at him, but maintained her speed. Her mom would be angry if she took too long. Besides, Richard only spoke English, and Esperanza's English wasn't that great. "I just got a new kitten, if you want to see it." He pointed into his open door. Esperanza stopped walking to peer in, but she saw only a pile of dirty dishes in his sink and a swarm of flies. If she squinted, she could see ants. What did *kitten* mean? That was an animal, Esperanza remembered.

"Un gato! Tengo un gato."

Oh, right. A kitten was a baby cat. Esperanza looked again.

"I don't see...?"

“You have to come inside. It must have gone into my bedroom.” Richard waved her up to come closer.

“I’m sorry. I go . . . I have to go.” Esperanza made a motion like she was mopping. Richard shrugged and eased back into his chair. Esperanza left and swallowed. She put her headphones in so she wouldn’t hear him on the way back. Maybe she could go around his cabin through the mango grove so he wouldn’t see her? That would be hard with a mop.

Clara stopped sleeping at night and instead went to the rock and waited for the spirit to return and heal her. It didn’t come. She would watch that crime cable channel about stalkers killing the women who rejected them. Eliza’s had small TV sets and English cable, but the commercials were in Spanish. The story always started with a promising young lady. She was usually beautiful. Were only beautiful people murdered, or was it just that no one gave a fuck otherwise? Sometimes they were Southern beauty queens with big hair and dreams of being a teacher and wife. Sometimes they were concert violinists in the city. Sometimes they were fresh-faced college students on scholarships. The shows painted a picture of a smiling, beautiful girl who wouldn’t hurt a fly or risk selling her body for rent money. Girls worth mourning. Then a sick, disgusting, evil man would meet her, and he would seem nice at first. Sometimes they went on a couple of dates and he promised to make her dreams come true. Sometimes the woman married him, even, and had a couple of his babies. She would work to support him as he went to school or took drugs or failed at starting up businesses. She was the perfect model of femininity: Patient, maternal, loving, honorable. She never strayed outside, and instead found solace in

loving her children. And then the monster would strangle her, or rape and murder her, and she would be fighting and crying until her last breathy, orgasmic breath.

Clara kept losing weight. About every other day, she would order a pizza and pay for it with her credit card. She didn't throw away the pizza boxes in time, and ants and roaches and even a scorpion noticed. Since she didn't want to walk up to the main house to throw the boxes out, so she stacked them in her refrigerator so the bugs wouldn't come.

Her period didn't come, either. Her breasts got smaller. She kept rolling that old memory over in her mind.

That didn't happen. I made that up. No one would ever do that. Drug and sell a woman like that. Especially not another woman. I made that up.

Clara realized that she didn't remember arriving at Eliza's. She had planned to meet up with Suzie, she knew that much.

Clara took out her phone and connected to the wifi. She logged into her bank account for the first time in months and scrolled through her past expenses.

She was in the red. By a lot. Her bank had even started charging her for overdraft fees.

There was her first purchase in Costa Rica. April. It was food—She remembered her first meal in Costa Rica. It was disappointing. She was expecting spicy, Mexican-type food, so she ordered nachos. What she had received was something like horse meat with cold, lemon-flavored mayo on top. She had eaten every bite, of course.

But then there were blank patches. She had a puppy. Where was the puppy now?

And that man—Did he have a name? Could she even find him? Did he exist?

The haunted rock had no answers. It only offered only a view of the stars. Some of them moved, some of them were bright. Clara liked the ones that flickered like fireflies caught in a spiderweb.

My insides are drying up, she thought. She imagined dying on the rock. Luis would probably mow around her, or maybe he would do what he did with the dead animals and branches—drag her down to the river and burn her.

The third Sunday of June, Richard was sitting on his porch again. Esperanza was doing her normal chores: She had started by helping her mother cook breakfast, then she had cleaned after the church group that came to sing on Sundays, and then she had to dry the linens and towels on a line before the rain started. She tried to avoid him, but after a few times of walking up and down the path, she couldn't ignore his waving.

“You're such a pretty young girl. You're really going to blossom into quite the young lady.” Esperanza understood only a little of what he said. She knew *pretty young girl*. “Thank you,” she peeped.

“Come in. I want to talk to you.” Richard had soft wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. They were clear. Esperanza wondered if he had a gun. The thought came from nowhere.

Esperanza stepped inside. Richard had bought a lot of his own furniture, and in a very short time. Everything was made of solid wood. He had a circular table that, upon closer inspection, was really the trunk of a tree.

Eliza didn't have such heavy furniture. Everything she had was light and easy to take apart—nimble, hollow furniture and dresser drawers that didn't line up right when you closed

them. Richard bought deep furniture, furniture that was too big for the room. He motioned for Esperanza to sit on the green recliner chair. He didn't have a couch.

“Here, relax. Lay back like this.” Richard pulled the wooden lever on the side of the chair and it opened up. Her legs propped up, her head fell back. “Isn't that better? So how long have you worked with your mom?” Esperanza swallowed.

“My mom . . . I go to school. I help, sometimes.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

“Esperanza, it can be hard, you know. You Costa Ricans seem to have life all figured out. You all are so happy, you live so simply. I wish I could be more like you, to be honest. There's just something so . . . pure about the way you all live. Sure, it's changed a lot. There are a lot more Americans, and now you have iPhones and all that—but there's still something here. The people. The philosophy. Costa Ricans are just so *warm*. Do you know what I mean?” Esperanza didn't bother to correct him. She wasn't really Costa Rican. She was Nicaraguan. Well, she was born in Costa Rica, so she technically was . . . It was complicated. She didn't know how to express that in English, so she just nodded. “I am haunted by my dead wife. By all this money. You think money would make life easier, right? It doesn't. Not really. What are your dreams, Esperanza?”

Her dreams? Esperanza tried to sit up in the recliner and push it back into a regular chair. It didn't seem to budge. The back stayed down and the leg rest stayed up.

“I want . . . to go to New York.” Esperanza wanted a lot of things. She wanted to be a dentist. She wanted to have enough money to take extra classes, or to join a sports team or learn a musical instrument.

“Go to New York? Be a famous actress? That’s cute. You know, you’re very pretty. I might be able to take some pictures of you, send them to a modeling agent. What would you say to that?”

Esperanza felt like she had to get out of the house. She didn’t like sitting back like this, and he had one arm near her head. Richard was hovering over her.

“You know, a lot of modeling agents need to see a full body shot. Like in a bikini. Do you have a bikini or something else you could wear? Maybe just your bra and panties? Are you wearing a bra and underwear?” Esperanza then tried to stand up. This wasn’t right.

Richard pushed her back down.

“I know you don’t understand, but I’m trying to help you. Stay still.” Esperanza closed her eyes as Richard started moving her shirt and feeling underneath her clothes.

Her mother had told her that this might happen. She had given her advice. “Don’t scream, because they enjoy that. And don’t moan, either, because then you’re a *puta*. When a man does that, the only way to win is to pretend you don’t care at all. Don’t scream. Don’t make any noise. Act like it isn’t happening.” Her mom had lost her virginity to an uncle who liked to come over when he couldn’t afford a prostitute. “Men can’t stand being ignored. If you can ignore them while they’re doing *that*, then you’ll always have that over them. You can keep yourself, in that way.”

The recliner groaned when Richard climbed on top of it. He removed Esperanza's baseball cap. "Such pretty hair," he said. "Look at me. Look in my eyes." Esperanza didn't move. Maybe he would think she didn't understand him. "Dammit, look at me!" Richard reached into her pants and Esperanza knew he was looking for that spot she was never supposed to mention.

"Ugh, you're just like the other one. No life." The *other* one? Esperanza tried to pretend she was in the chair at the dentist's office, and instead of being touched down there, she was getting her teeth cleaned. She remembered the lamp the dentist had used.

"Dammit. Dammit." Esperanza looked down. Her jeans were undone, her hair poked out of the open zipper. Richard climbed off her. His pants were undone, too. He was moving his hand up and down like he was trying to pump air into a basketball. His penis looked like a pale, speckled worm with yellow droplets. "You could help, you know."

Esperanza pushed harder on the chair, which closed fast and made her lurch forward. She stood up, pulled her pants high, and ran for the door.

"Wait. No, wait!" Esperanza was out the door. Her pants here still unzipped, her pubic hair poking through. She ran down to the kitchen without anyone else seeing her. She slid the door shut, closed the lock, and fell face-down on the cot. An hour later, it started to rain.

Chapter 9: Employee Relations III

She didn't tell her mother what happened. Estrella had come in to find Esperanza face down on the cot.

“What are you doing? Taking a nap? Get up!”

“Why? There's nothing to do.”

“There's *plenty* to do! I had to mop five villas, chase a large spider out of one of the villas, sweep algae off the path to the pool . . . and look at you! Just *sitting* there in bed! If Dona Eliza saw you—”

“She would do what? I don't work for Dona Eliza. *You* do.”

Estrella mumbled something about Esperanza being a lazy *malcreada* and left her to sulk in the dark. Esperanza listened to the birds coming out after the rain, and then going back in before the sun went down.

She wouldn't believe me, anyway. She would say I'm just doing it for attention. Or that I deserved it for wearing makeup.

Esperanza pretended to sleep when her mother came in for the night.

“Esperanza? Do you want anything to eat?” She said nothing. “Esperanza?” Still nothing. “Are you feeling okay? Are you sick?” Esperanza felt her mother's eyes on her. Then she changed into the pajamas, turned off the light, and climbed into the cot.

Esperanza waited by the soccer field for the bus. She could wait by Eliza's gate, but then someone inside could see her. Getting to *Multiplaza* from Eliza's was a pain. It was easier when they lived in Santa Ana. She could take a bus on the *pista* for less than five-hundred colones.

Now she would have to take the bus all the way into San Jose, and take another one to get on the *pista*.

Someone had written *VIVA SELE Y NAVAS* in black sharpie on the bench inside the bus stop. Esperanza almost smiled seeing all the cars with Costa Rican flags in their windows, on their hoods. She had almost forgotten how well the *sele* was doing. Maybe she could see her friends during the next game. They could watch the game in San Jose, in La Sabana, if the big stadium was still open.

Esperanza looked down the street towards Atenas. If she turned around and walked back now, she could pretend that she had gone to the pharmacy and that she felt really, truly sick. Her mom would let her sit on the cot. She would have to go to school tomorrow, and then she wouldn't have to see Richard.

The bus pulled up. Blue, with *COOPETRANSATENAS* written on the side. It had black curtains in the window. Little eyes filtered down. Esperanza grabbed a red bill and climbed on.

“I wouldn't say anything. I mean, that's what men do when you're alone with them.”

Laura was shopping for new dresses. Her family had money. They had first met when Laura realized Esperanza *didn't* have money. She thought she was entertaining, a jewel, a forbidden toy. Her parents hated their friendship. Their daughter should have been excelling in school, training to be a musician or an Olympian, and not spending her time with a *Nica*. Esperanza couldn't even visit Laura's house.

While it started out as an act of rebellion, they had really become good friends. Sometimes Laura would buy her a hat.

Laura's older siblings went to private schools, but not Laura. Laura liked to get kicked out of private schools and destroy parked bicycles. If she found a public fountain, she would drop a box of suds into it. She thought these things were funny. She had never had to worry about getting kicked out of the country, so she didn't mind getting kicked out of everywhere else.

"He didn't put it in you, right?"

"No. He just like . . . took it out, and it was just . . . it was weird. It was kind of sad. And it leaked out like, this yellow—"

"Ew. He peed?"

"No, it wasn't like pee. It was like glue, but yellow."

"Yellow, like, how yellow?"

"Yellow like pee, like this yellow . . ." Esperanza picked up a canary yellow blouse.

"Ew! It's supposed to be white or clear, not *yellow*. What's wrong with him?"

"He's kind of old. Maybe that's what happens to it? Like, it can't make it as well, so it all becomes yellow? I don't know. It was my first time seeing one in person."

"Wow. I would just stay away from the *viejo verde*. He's never tried anything anywhere else, right? Does he follow you?"

"No. It's a lot of land, so it's not like I have to be near him, but I still don't like being around him. I don't like having to *live* with him."

"It'll be fine. It's actually kind of a funny story. And nothing bad really happened to you."

"I guess you're right. I just feel really weird about it."

"It's weird. And it just happened yesterday. You'll see though, it's not really a big deal. But yeah, maybe next time, find a rich dude who doesn't leak yellow cum."

“I didn’t *find* him, and that’s so nasty!”

They laughed and walked around Multiplaza. They eventually bought an ice cream cone from McDonald’s. Laura complained about her dad. She did that all the time.

“When I was a kid, he wouldn’t even let me play with Legos because they were boy toys. And he made my room a princess theme, and I hated Disney princesses. Did you know he doesn’t let me wear black? I have to sneak black clothes on under my clothes and change outside if I want to wear it.” Esperanza did know that already. She had let Laura borrow a couple of her black tops for that same reason.

The conversation didn’t go back to Richard and what had happened. They found a couple of boys. Laura started flirting and they went to a movie. Both boys wanted Laura, and Esperanza found herself sitting in the aisle seat as they fought over who would give her popcorn.

The only man who wants me is an old pervert who leaks yellow glue.

Clara loved nighttime. She walked around the property like a ghost.

She also used the opportunity to crawl into every space. The laundry room, Luis’s storage room. She held his pistol. It looked like the kind the other man had. No, it wasn’t. Was it?

Then moths began to fly into the lit bulb and she put the gun down, turned the light off.

She went to the square pools and sat between the normal pool and the shallow pool. The cold ground felt like a tomb. She looked up and watched the stars. She didn’t blink.

He had definitely walked past her tent. His footprints had stopped. He had crawled in with the gun. He had been crying. He wiped snot off his face. He had a mole on his neck, a hairy one.

“You can’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t, I won’t.”

“*You* don’t understand. I can’t just *believe* you.” He held the gun to her head. Clara heard whimpering she didn’t recognize.

“You *can’t* tell anyone. I have to do this.”

“Please don’t. Please. I’ll do anything. I’ll do—I mean, I don’t—It doesn’t make sense for me to tell, right? I wouldn’t want those kinds of people coming after me. Doing that to me. I wouldn’t tell.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re too fuckin’ old, you fat pig.” He was crying even as he tried to sound tough. “I don’t know how my sister still *does* it. I’m not that bad, right? Look at me. Look at how I feel. And isn’t it worse, because she’s a woman? Fuckin’ *look at me*.”

Clara just nodded over and over again.

“Please. You’re not bad. You’re not bad. You’re a nice guy. You wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

She heard someone’s voice.

“ . . . lucky in Clara’s tent . . . ”

The man had put his hand over her mouth and whispered.

“Shut up. They think we’re fucking. Which isn’t such a bad idea—” He had started taking off his pants. He was wearing sweatpants. “Tell me I’m a good guy.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t fuckin’ say *okay*. Tell me.”

“You’re a—You did what you had to do,” She was talking to herself. “You were just trying to get by. It doesn’t make you a bad person.” He was trying but he couldn’t get hard. He gave up and pulled his sweatpants back on.

“It’s the cold. It’s too cold out. That’s all. Normally, I could do it.” He had kissed her forehead. “Next time. Next time, okay?” He kissed her face over and over. “Don’t worry. Next time.” Then he had shuffled out and walked away.

On Friday, Costa Rica beat Italy, and Esperanza was dying to go out with Laura. She hadn’t seen any of her friends during the games. Estrella was staunchly against Costa Rica, and against FIFA in general.

Esperanza didn’t ask permission. She left a note and took the bus to Santa Ana to meet Laura in the *centro*.

“We can’t go back to my house. You know how my parents are. Let’s go out.”

“Out?” Esperanza wasn’t really dressed to go out. Next to Laura, she would look so plain. “Your parents have never really liked me, but I don’t think they hate me *that* much.”

“They’ve kind of gotten worse,” Laura paused. She was hiding something. “They want me to walk to Cartago with them this year. To see the Virgin.”

“Are you serious? Why?”

“My dad is sick. They think it will help him. He’s been to all the best doctors. It’s something with his stomach. He eats and eats but it’s like his stomach doesn’t absorb any of the nutrition. My mom is even thinking it could be *mal de ojo*. There are some people around who

are jealous, she says. Who want to see successful people fail. And she knows your mom goes to witch doctors.”

“So...she thinks I’m making him sick?”

“I told her it was ridiculous. Superstitious bullshit. But she says there’s no other cause. There’s *no* other reason my dad could be sick. She’s always been distrustful of Nicas. She won’t even let them clean our house.”

“I’m not even Nica. I’m Costa Rican.”

“Yeah, but you know what I mean. You’re not *really* Costa Rican. Not to her.”

Esperanza didn’t know what Laura meant. She didn’t know what anyone meant, and no one had bothered to tell her. She had been hearing about how she wasn’t “really” Costa Rican since she started grade school. She had never even *been* to Nicaragua.

Laura broke the tension. “So...where do you want to go? Dancing?”

“I’m not dressed to go dancing.” *And I don’t want to put myself on display for men to stare at me*, Esperanza thought.

“Well, what else are we going to do? Sit around? There are so many parties tonight. We’re already near San Jose. I know a place. They don’t check for IDs. It’s near San Pedro.”

Esperanza agreed. She sort of had to go along with whatever Laura wanted to do, since she had the money for the cab.

It took longer than Esperanza expected to get to San Pedro. There was a lot of traffic. They drove past La Sabana, the big square park that connected San Jose with major highways into the central valley. He tried to go straight into San Pedro from there, but had little success, and finally he decided to follow buses that were headed to UCR. Every time he tried to take a

shortcut, he ended up going the wrong way down a one-way street. Eventually, Esperanza recognized Los Yoses. They were near Mall San Pedro. The streets were well-lit, but definitely dirtier and more narrow than the ones in La Garita or Santa Ana. There was a lot of graffiti—Someone had written “Suck my dick.” Then there was better, more meaningful graffiti—George Bush as a Nazi, slander against NAFTA, and swastikas. There was a painting of three men in red jumpsuits, and beneath it the caption “CORRE, CHINO, CORRE!” San Pedro was like that—There were a lot of college students here. Esperanza felt proud. Her mother would hate that she was in a place like this. But why not? She might even go to UCR one day, especially if she wanted to become a dentist.

“Go, Esperanza! Get out of the car!” That was Laura. Esperanza hadn’t even noticed that the car had pulled over. They got out in front of the club, which was filled with gorgeous women who were, of course, much better dressed than Esperanza was. Was she even wearing eyeliner?

Seeing these girls and their large breasts and fat bottoms made Esperanza feel as young as Belle. Hadn’t she just been climbing trees with her? How could she ever think she could compete with these women? She looked down at her jeans and was embarrassed to see that they were a little too short. She adjusted her fitted cap.

“Laura, I can’t go in there. Look at what I’m wearing.”

“You think I didn’t come with something? Come behind here.” Laura gestured to an alleyway. Esperanza could see it was next to a *putero*. In the window Esperanza saw a waving cat, which was supposed to be good luck, and a neon sign that said ABIERTO. Behind the sign and cat was a dirty velvet curtain Esperanza couldn’t see through.

“I don’t know—”

“Just come on. Change your shirt, at least. And I have some heels for you.”

Laura had a plastic bag. She pulled out a black sequined top and wedge heels. Esperanza changed as quickly as she good, and then it was Laura’s turn. Esperanza looked down at her shirt and was a little surprised to see something like breasts there. She had been wearing bras, but hadn’t noticed that she had slowly been filling them out. She might even need a bigger size.

Laura shoved their clothes into the plastic bag and hid them in the alley. Esperanza fit into the wedge heels and walked effortlessly. She liked feeling taller. She was light enough on her feet, and her skinniness made her legs look longer than they were.

“You look good,” Laura said. She sounded a little too surprised. “Let’s go in.”

They walked two blocks over to the club. It was a Hawaiian beach-themed bar and club—the walls were painted green, and the doorways were lined with bamboo. The bar and the walls were decorated with banners displaying the price of beers—*Rock Ice, Imperial, Pilsen*. Men were wearing button-down shirts, Campbell jerseys, and Navas jerseys. The women looked like dolls—push-up bras, short skirts. Some of them were wearing tight Costa Rican jerseys with short shorts. There were a few university girls wearing leggings, longer skirts, and thick plaid tops. *At least I’m better-looking than they are*, Esperanza thought.

After a couple of songs, a college-age man with a thick neck complimented Esperanza’s cap. He asked what kind of beer she liked. Esperanza said she liked Rock Ice Lime . . . She had never had it, but Laura had once said it was the only kind of beer she could tolerate. Laura nodded and winked at her, then went off with a much older man with a buzz cut.

“I’m Ramon. Do you want to dance with me?” He said when he came back with the beer. Esperanza had a sip. The lime made it just sweet enough that she could keep drinking it.

“Sure!” He seemed nice.

She tried to follow his lead, but every dance move seemed to result in him smashing his crotch into hers. She stumbled in her heels.

“Don’t dance much, do you?” He asked. Esperanza wanted to scream. Instead she smiled and had another sip of beer.

Ramon smashed into her again and Esperanza backed off of him. She then noticed his dark brown eyes were rolling into the back of his head.

“I’m so sorry. It’s just—you’re pretty. Can I kiss you?”

“No. . .” Esperanza walked off into the dance floor to find Laura. She hadn’t wanted to come here to begin with, and this is exactly what she didn’t want. She found Laura getting cozy with two older men at the bar. They seemed to be playfully fighting over her.

“Esperanza! This is—”

“I don’t care who it is!” She screamed to be heard over the music, but at that moment the music died down. Esperanza lowered her voice. “Laura, I want to leave.”

“And go where?”

“I don’t know. Your house.”

“You can’t—”

“Anywhere, okay?”

One of the older men chimed in. “Our apartment isn’t far away. You could come hang out with us.”

Esperanza looked at them. One had a tattoo of black and white tribal symbols all the way up his arm. It disappeared under his shirt. The other had a white tank top with “CALLE 13” tattooed to his bicep. Both looked underdressed yet comfortable at the disco.

“That sounds fun! Let’s go. Esperanza, this is Rafael and Yamil. Yamil is a tattoo artist.”

Esperanza looked at him. She had an idea.

“Then that’s what I want to do.”

“What?” Laura frowned.

“I want a tattoo,” Esperanza turned to Yamil, the one with the Calle 13 tattoo. “Can you give me one?”

“Sure, if you’re eighteen.”

“Of course I am.”

Yamil looked her up and down.

“You’re eighteen?”

“Yes. Are you going to give me a tattoo or not?”

Yamil laughed. “You are too impatient. Well first, let’s get out of here. And maybe. Maybe I’ll do it. It depends on what you want.”

“Okay. Fine.”

“Esperanza, are you *sure* that’s what you want to do?”

Esperanza saw Ramon humping another girl on the dance floor. She also fell over and spilled some of her beer.

“Yes. That’s what I want to do.”

Esperanza didn't come home until dawn. She was back in her regular clothes, but she was still sure her clothes smelled like alcohol and marijuana.

Rafael and Yamil had been nice. They had tried to kiss the girls, of course, but Laura and Esperanza both said no and eventually called the cab.

"Laura, aren't your parents going to wonder where you've been?"

"I just told them I was sleeping at a friend's house."

"And the driver?"

"Oh, he's not my parents' driver. I'm not that dumb. This is just some cab I call when I want to go out."

She had no story for her mother. She might even get a beating for what she did.

Esperanza winced and touched the space over her heart.

When the taxi pulled up to Eliza's gate, Esperanza saw that it was locked. Luis hadn't shown up for work yet.

Shit, Esperanza thought. *I was counting on the gate being open. I don't want to have to see him—*

Esperanza was a little afraid of Luis. He intimidated her more than her own mother.

"Laura, can we maybe . . . I don't know . . . come back later? I mean, if your parents already think you're out . . ."

"I told them I would be back this morning for church. And it takes like forty minutes to get from here to my house."

"The gate is locked."

"Someone will open it eventually, right?"

“Luis usually opens it when he comes in to work.”

“So? There you go.”

“I guess.”

Esperanza got out of the cab. Laura had paid for the cab to come this far. She couldn't really ask her to stay.

“Thanks, Laura.”

“Of course! You're a lot crazier than I thought you were, Esperanza. You really surprised me.” Esperanza didn't respond. The car backed out.

Esperanza waited for about fifteen minutes before she saw Luis walking from the bus stop from the soccer field. He had a small, dusty backpack and he seemed to jump as he walked. Esperanza wondered how he always seemed happy—Maybe not *happy*, necessarily, but certainly *alive*. He was always . . . spry.

Luis started to walk slower and his eyes grew dark when he saw Esperanza. He pulled out his key.

“Good morning, Luis.”

“Good morning.”

He looked at her. Esperanza looked down.

“Why are you outside the gate without a key? And so early?”

“What are you, my mom?”

“No, but if you don't answer me, I'm not going to open the gate. I'll hop the fence, go get your mother and she can come up here and *she* can open the gate and let you in.”

“Please don't, Luis.”

“Why shouldn’t I? What are you doing out here?”

“Why do you care so much?” Esperanza winced and touched her heart again.

“What is—” Luis grabbed Esperanza’s left arm and pulled it away from her chest. She gasped and howled. “Are you hurt?! What is wrong with you?”

Esperanza pulled her arm away from him and breathed heavily. Then, with her head turned away, she muttered, “I got a tattoo.”

“You *what*?”

“A tattoo. I got a tattoo last night.”

“But you’re—you’re fourteen.”

“Thirteen.”

They stood in silence. Luis sighed.

“Let me see it.”

Esperanza moved her collar over and pulled up the square of gauze that was covering the spot.

“It’s not that big. What the hell is that?”

“Something I drew.”

“It certainly looks like something. Come with me.”

Luis opened the gate and motioned for Esperanza to follow him. He took her into his storage area behind the swimming pool. This was where Luis kept his saws, sandpaper, machetes, varnish, hammers, lawn mowers, extra parts, and oddly shaped yet useful sticks. Esperanza saw a gun in the corner and was mildly afraid that he was going to shoot her in the head.

Luis rummaged through a box and pulled out a dirty jar that had no label. Esperanza could see a yellow, sticky goo inside. It reminded her of whatever had been coming out of Richard's penis.

"Put this on it twice a day. Once in the morning, once at night. And don't swim in any pool until I tell you that you can. And Esperanza?"

She looked up at him.

"If you ever do anything like that again I will beat you myself, in this room."

"You're not my dad."

"No, and maybe that's what's wrong. Let's go see your mom. And go along with what I say."

Esperanza followed Luis down the path towards the kitchen. She felt like Luis was leading her down to the river to die, like he was going to stab her in the throat and kill her like a hog and all her blood would run down into the water and no one would ever know she was gone or that he did it.

Her mom rushed out of the kitchen.

"Esperanza! Where were you?!"

"It's all right, Estrella. She was with me. She took a cab into Alajuela and stayed with me last night."

"Esperanza, is this true?"

She nodded.

"Where did you get the money for the cab?"

"I paid, Estrella."

“You made Luis pay?! What is the matter with you?!”

“It really is all right, Estrella. We enjoyed her company. She helped me watch the boys and even cooked for us. She more than made up for it. In fact, I wouldn’t mind if she came and watched the kids more often. You know, my wife is back in Nicaragua, and I could use the help. We talked about it, and she said she would love to watch the kids on nights and weekends. Isn’t that right, Esperanza?”

Esperanza nodded again.

“She could come home with me and I’ll bring her right back to you every day.”

Esperanza could feel her freedom disappearing. She hated Luis.

“Well . . . I guess that’s all right. If she’s helping. I wish she’d help out *here* more often. Don’t do that again without telling me, Esperanza. I was worried.”

Luis hadn’t been lying. He did need help at home. Gabriela was getting tired of taking care of the kids, especially since it was obvious that Merlin wasn’t coming back. The kids were starting to ask for their mother. They had never been apart from her for this long.

Richard had ordered this large tube. He wanted to put it near the big light, the telephone poll by the path near the big rock. Luis could do it today. He was pretty much done attaching the bars to the villas—He only had to do the studios.

Luis went to his storage area. He had put the tube in there. Richard was in the community kitchen on his tablet. Luis motioned for Richard to follow him.

Richard stood in Luis’s storage room with his hands behind his back.

“*Hola! Pura Vida.*” Richard’s Spanish was awful.

Luis pointed to the tube. Richard laughed. Luis wanted to ask him how to set it up, but Richard didn't understand. He held his hands up, signaling for Richard to wait a minute. He came back with Eliza.

"Oh, Richard. Your friend's tube came."

"Yes! He knows where to set it up, right?"

"Yes, Luis just wants to know if you know how to set it up once he has it in place."

"Of course! I can do it on my iPad."

Luis got out his tallest ladder and placed the tube high above the breakers. It looked stable enough. He tried to shake it. The rain and wind might knock it down.

When they were done, Richard looked happy.

"Now I don't have to come all the way up to the kitchen to work!"

Eliza tried hard not to roll her eyes. She got Luis alone, and asked if he wanted a coffee.

"Sure," Luis said.

"Luis, did Eugenia finally pay you?"

"Oh. I'm not working for her anymore, Eliza."

"Why not?"

"She never paid me, that's the first thing. And my wife is too sick. She went back home. There's nothing they can do." He shrugged. "So I need the day off. To spend with my kids. A babysitter watches them now."

"Luis, that's terrible. I'm sorry." They stirred their coffee for a while but didn't sip in. Eliza ate a cookie despite her diet.

"Are you doing okay? How are the kids?"

“They don’t know. I don’t think I’m going to tell them. Just going to hope . . . that they’re too young to remember this when they’re older.”

“Maybe that’s the best way. Maybe you could move in with Estrella and Esperanza? Into the kitchen? There’s more than enough room if you use the back.”

Luis sighed through his nose.

“I wanted to ask you that. I didn’t know how. Yes, we’ll move in. It will be good for them to be here instead. They’ll have space to run around—”

“I would feel safer with you being here, too. And I’m sure Estrella would enjoy the company.”

Luis remembered what Merlin had said before she left. She had been right. He had started living with Estrella, and then they had started sleeping together. But wasn't it a bit unfair of her to accuse? A single man and woman, of the same age, relatively young and relatively old, and unattached, poor, living together---Wasn't it obvious that they would fall in love? Isn't that what was supposed to happen? And not the kind of love that came in a jewelry box with a bouquet of flowers, the love of young people who didn't believe in tomorrows or sicknesses—the kind of desperate love they made in the warm, metal walk-in freezer while the kids were sleeping.

Three kids, and now, possibly, more. Luis hoped he wouldn't curse this wife the way he had the others, make her sick.

They had fallen in love—he called it that, because the “falling” part seemed accurate—a week or so after he had moved in. Estrella would watch him build things for their small house, at first with her shoulders around her ears and her arms crossed, and then she would make tortillas

as he worked, but still keep an eye on him, and now she was a bit of a distraction—a chatty, happy thing. The first time they had sex, Luis learned that Estrella moaned when he kissed her but grew silent when he was inside her, and she trembled like she was cold, like she had gone into San Jose after the afternoon rain and had forgotten to take a sweater.

She looked much better with her clothes off, he thought. Bras, pants, and underwear all seemed to dig in at all the wrong angles. He liked her uninterrupted belly, the small roll of fat in her back, her large thighs that slowly melted into a round ass.

He often forgot that she had had a son, and that upset her because she acted like this dead child should somehow be involved in family decisions. He couldn't say the *three* children, for example, and if he named them all, he had to include her dead son. Refusal to do so would make her weep uncontrollably. He could see why Esperanza was so bent out of shape about her mother.

They became a family quickly. Estrella was used to and desired the role of wife and mother, and Luis's sons started to fill the void of her dead one. Luis pushed his sons around the mango grove in a wheel barrel, and, when her mother wasn't around and she didn't feel the need to be tough, Esperanza let him push her around, too. She didn't talk back to him. He let her go out with her friends, but enforced a strict curfew. He wouldn't let her shout at him from another room, but had her stand in front of him if she had something to say. And his sons had someone to take care of them while he worked.

There was something strange, a moment he had with Esperanza. He had been pushing her around. She had been laughing the way she always did. They made it out of the mango grove towards the large rock. From there, they had a view of Richard's house. Then Esperanza stopped laughing. She just stared and swallowed and asked him to turn back around. Luis remembered

her strange tattoo and Clara's shaved head. And then he knew something he had never intended to know.

Merlin's mother called every once in a while, but she didn't have a house phone in Nicaragua, so she had to call him when she went into town. As her phone calls became more and more rare, Luis knew it meant Merlin's health was getting worse. Then, he received the call he had been waiting for.

"Didn't your last wife get sick, too? Do other women a favor and stay away from them. You are obviously cursed." Merlin's mother hung up the phone before Luis could ask about the funeral. He had walked back to the kitchen to find his boys playing with ants and spiders with hard, colorful shells. They ran up to him when they saw him.

"Push us around, papi!"

"Yes, yes! Again, again!"

The boys had stopped asking for their mother once Estrella came into the picture. Children could be horrible in that way—They had no memories, or if they did, they could adapt quickly, unapologetically. They didn't feel guilty about dropping their real mother for a substitute. The younger one would probably not remember his mother at all. The older one would, but she would be a warm shadow to him, a gentle voice with undefined characteristics, a spirit, a goddess, almost. He would take the few details and memories he had and store them away, and they would become more and more distorted and angelic as time went on. But Estrella, Estrella would be his mother now—She would dish out meals and punishment, take him to school, take his fever, and help him with his homework until the day his math and reading surpassed her own.

Chapter 10: This is Why It's Called the Rainy Season

Costa Rica had made it past the first round and come out on top. Now they had to play Greece to get to the semi-quarterfinals.

Francisco was going to have a heart attack. He hadn't even been to work the whole third week of June, and his boss hadn't even noticed because he had spent three-thousand dollars to fly to Brazil and watch the games in person.

They decided to spend the weekend watching the game in San Pedro, at Francisco's cousin's house. They slept on the couch. Suzie had just about enough money for her half of the rent. She wasn't going to worry about Clara's. Clara had to come out, to talk to someone, to pay her own share of the rent. She was adopting some of Francisco's philosophy; she wasn't going to worry as much.

The game was on June 29. The couple had slept on the couch. Francisco's cousin and his wife woke up early. She started cooking. He went to the *super* to buy more beer, *guaro*, and mixes.

"We're going to win!" Francisco said. "We're going to keep winning! We're going to win the whole thing!" Everyone was drunk by the time the game started. They had painted the Costa Rican flag on their faces. As they watched, Suzie noticed the crowd in the stadium was cheering for Costa Rica.

"Are there a lot of Costa Ricans there?"

"Hm? What?" Francisco had no patience for her during the games. "No, no. The other fans, they want Costa Rica to win now. They call us *Cenicienta*."

“Huh?”

“Cinderella. Say we are like Cinderella.”

One of Francisco’s older aunts pulled out her rosary beads and started praying. Suzie had learned not to laugh at everyone’s reaction to the soccer game. They were serious, really serious. Francisco’s cousin’s wife brought the aunt tea with honey and consoled her.

“We won. We won already,” she kept saying. *Ya ganamos.*

The game ended with a tie, meaning they had to go into penalty kicks. Francisco’s aunt started praying out loud. Even the children were on the floor with their heads in their hands.

“What if we lose. What if we lose?” One of them said. Suzie understood that.

The aunt exploded.

“*Don’t open your mouth! Or think!*”

Then it happened: Navas blocked Greece’s fourth penalty shot. He rolled over and kissed the air with little expression on his face. The tiny living room exploded with screams and kisses—Someone outside ran up the road wearing nothing but a Costa Rican flag. “*Ticos, ticos!*”

Costa Rica made their last penalty shot. They had won.

Francisco’s family started to grab all of their flags, their horns and noisemakers.

“Let’s go!” Francisco said.

“Where?”

“*La Fuente de la Hispanidad.* It’s where you go when Costa Rica wins. Come on! We’re all going!” Somehow, all twelve of the people who had been in the living room fit into one small car. The two people sitting by the windows in the back seat held Costa Rican flags out the window.

As they drove into San Jose, Suzie saw people walking down the street, hundreds of them.

I thought people only gathered like this to protest, she thought. Not to party.

They parked and walked to *La Fuente de la Hispanidad*. It was a large fountain in the center of a roundabout in San Pedro. Above the fountain was an overpass, and across from the overpass was the clay-colored mall of San Pedro.

Thousands of people wearing red walked towards the fountain and the mall of San Pedro — They carried their babies on their shoulders, waved large Costa Rican flags, banged drums, blew on horns, and Suzie could smell weed. People were hanging off the balcony of the mall, screaming from the overpass on top of the intersection, others were in the fountain itself splashing one another.

Then Suzie saw a familiar face.

“It’s the man with the chicken on his head!”

The Purriscal man from the *tope* was there. He had wrapped the chicken in Costa Rica’s colors. Even his cowboy hat was covered with red, white, and blue frills. Francisco’s young cousin showed up with a large drum strapped to his body. A few friends with smaller drums followed him. As he played, Francisco followed the boys as they walked through the crowd. Every so often, someone would start the *ticos ticos* chant, and everyone would follow. Some people had tears in their eyes. Suzie noticed women with the Costa Rican flag on their nails, on their eyelids, on their cheeks, as a replacement for their butt pockets. Little girls had Costa Rican berets in their hair. Someone had a sign that read *Viva Navas!*

Suzie started to feel the crowd behind her begin to press on her. She saw Francisco pushing his way through. His cousin and his friends stopped playing. A group of three drunk men started shouting at him to play again.

“Francisco!” Suzie started to notice that some people were wearing masks. It was getting dark. Francisco held her hand. Suzie felt herself being pushed forward towards the fountain.

“Let’s go,” Francisco said. “It’s too many people.” Suzie nodded. It felt like the whole country was there.

When they got out of the thick of the crowd, Suzie felt better. Francisco’s cousin and his friends started to play again. Fans started to dance to the beat of his drum and sing. Out of a boombox, Suzie heard a song that was starting to sound familiar. She had heard it during the first game, and in people’s cars, and at the bar . . .

Agárrense de las manos

apoyemos nuestro equipo

la selección nacional

es el honor de los ticos

la sensación sin igual

nos vemos en el mundial

Everyone started to sing along. Suzie started laughing. She had never seen anyone, much less a group of thousands of people, so excited over winning a soccer game.

I wish Clara could see this. Suzie reached into her pocket and snapped a quick video.

They left the crowd as it got dark. Everyone started to break off and head to bars to keep dancing and drinking. Francisco's cousin asked if they needed a ride back home. He was going to drop off the drums and then come back out to drink.

"Do you want to go out, or go back to La Garita?"

"I feel bad for leaving Clara. Maybe we should go back. I think maybe I should talk to her. She's been pretty much alone for three weeks now."

Francisco nodded, but she could tell he was disappointed. *Great, I'm the bad guy no matter what I pick,* Suzie thought. "You could drop me off and then go out."

"No, no. It's okay." They reached the car. "Did you like?"

"Yes! No one acts this way about soccer back home." With the traffic, it took them an hour just to get out of San Pedro. They were stuck behind a pickup truck filled with shirtless guys and girls in skintight jeans drinking. *No wonder he wanted to stay and party. We can't exactly leave anyway.*

They sat in traffic and Francisco played classic rock on low.

"So, you want to stay?"

"I don't know, Francisco."

"You stay."

The traffic was too dense to argue. Suzie fell asleep.

The next morning, Keylor Navas was on the front page of *La Nacion*.

“Would you look at that?” Eliza said to herself as she picked up the paper. “Our little country. *Costa Pobre*. Ha!”

Lalo called. He was ecstatic.

“Ma, when I go on calls, people keep saying to me . . . You’re Costa Rican, right? People are actually *talking* about Costa Rica. They’re looking it up. No one has called me Puerto Rican all month. I wish I was there.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s so crazy in here.”

“What if they win, Ma?”

“I don’t know, Lalo. We play Holland next. And they are awful good. And so tall. Our ticos are so so short.”

“I know. But what if they win?”

“Lalo, please, I think Germany is going to win.”

“Ma, I have a question. Do you have a fig tree?”

“A what? No.”

I just wanted to know because . . . he packed a fig tree in his luggage today.”

“What?”

“He’s going back to Costa Rica today, and he packed a fig tree. Not a big one . . . but still.
A fig tree.”

“Why?”

“Well, he just kept saying how you liked figs. I think he’s going to give it to you as a
surprise.”

“I have enough trees here. What I need is for your father to leave me alone.”

“Ma, he’s just trying to—”

“Trying to *what*? He made his decisions twenty years ago. I don’t have to be nice. I don’t
have to accept fruit or trees or his apology. You know how your father is.”

“Yeah, but that’s just how he *is*. You know he still loves you.”

“So what? What, just because now he’s sorry, I have to be all right with everything? He
gets to go and have sex with the neighborhood while we’re married, and he makes a whole new
family and ruins my businesses over and over, but since he’s *sorry*, I’m just supposed to pretend
it didn’t happen? I’m supposed to be waiting here, heating up a dinner plate? That’s not how it
works. I have to live *my* life. And if it’s just *how he is* to be a cheating jackass, then he can be
that way somewhere else.”

“All right, all right. Calm down, Ma. I just wanted to know if you knew why he was
bringing a tree.”

*They always give their father a way out. If I agreed to marry him again, they would love
it.*

“I don’t know why he’s bringing a tree. But didn’t you tell him that he will never get through customs with it? They’re pretty clear. It says right there, you can’t bring plants. Is he going to say a tree isn’t a plant?”

“I tried to tell him that, but he wrapped his suitcase with twine and insisted that they wouldn’t be able to cut through it.”

“Do you know what kind of equipment they have at the airport? They can cut the locks right off your bag. They’ll open it if they want. And if it’s all wrapped up, that will probably make them want to open it even more.”

“I tried to tell him that, too, but he just kept saying how he *needed* the fig tree.”

“Well, I don’t know, Lalo.”

“How are things going there?”

“You know, same. When do you think you’re coming down?”

“Maybe in August. If not August, definitely October. Pancho and I want to get there in October and talk about some changes we want to make.”

“Like what?”

“Well, Pancho wants to move there in a year. And I think it would be nice if we could open a restaurant—”

“Lalo, I just got this place to be a little bit profitable. We don’t have enough people to have a restaurant. Hotels with hundreds of people have trouble making money with their restaurants. We only rent ten, eleven rooms. And they’re not filled all the time. There’s just not enough people to go through the hassle of the liquor license—”

“But Ma, people expect food. All of the big hotels have food.”

“I don’t know. It only seems like it would cost a lot of money, and it would be a pain all the time. Buying the food, hiring a cook, hiring waiters, or just plain doing it myself. I’ve run the restaurant before. It’s another job by itself. And if I’m over there, then I can’t be here.”

“Well, fine. What do you think would help?”

Eliza thought a moment. She didn’t know. She wasn’t the dreamer. She was a doer. She didn’t know what exactly would make the place better.

“Maybe . . . if. I don’t know. Americans complain about the Internet a lot. Maybe if somehow the Internet could be better? But we have a tube now. Richard bought one. It’s supposed to help.”

“A tube, Ma?”

“From Russia.”

“A Russian Internet tube.”

“Something like that. Look, I don’t know. I’m an old lady. I just let Luis put the tube up on the electric pole by the breakers.”

“Isn’t that like, a lightning rod?”

“—If you and your brother can think of something, then fine. I just don’t want to be stuck taking out loans, owing the bank, or running a restaurant. I like this kind of business. People pretty much take care of themselves.”

“Pancho tells me you have Nicaraguans living in the kitchen?”

“Lalo, it’s not like *that*. Luis is fixing the kitchen up nice. I’m getting more beds for them, too. It will be just like a house. We’re not using it as a kitchen right now. You’re making it sound like they’re living in a freezer or something awful.”

“Who is this Luis guy? Dad too just kept saying how this guy can do absolutely anything.”

“Yes, he can. He killed all the zorros, *gracias a dios*.”

“How did he do that?”

“He climbed up on the roof and cut their heads off.”

“Did any of the guests see that?”

“No—”

“Okay. Good. That just sounds crazy.”

“It’s not crazy. These things have to be done. He killed the bats that were living in the walls, too.”

“I know, Ma, but for Americans, that kind of thing is a little weird. So this Luis guy, you think it’s a good idea if he lives there?”

“Yes, you know, just in case. If he’s in the kitchen, then he can hear someone coming down.”

“You mean at night?”

“Yes . . . just to have someone over there, you know.” Eliza hadn’t told her sons about the break-in that had happened about a month ago.

Suzie woke up and recognized that she was on Francisco’s cousin’s couch. Francisco was watching TV next to her.

“Francisco! I thought I asked to go home.”

“You were sleeping. Traffic was not good. It’s easier to go back today.”

“But I wanted to talk to Clara.”

“Talk to her today.”

“Oh my God. You can be so—” She stood up and went to the bathroom. Then she heard a knock. It was Francisco.

“*Toalla?* For shower?” He was holding out a towel.

“So annoying!” Suzie went to close the door, then grabbed the towel out of his hand. She did want a shower.

When they got back to Eliza’s, Suzie lost her nerve. She didn’t know how to ask Clara the obvious question. Something had happened with Richard. Something terrible.

Part of Suzie’s inability to talk to her friend was a twang of guilt. She had always been jealous of Clara, and had thought in some corner of her mind that all this running around with rich men would lead to something like this. She had been raped, Suzie knew. By Richard. Something had also happened in the jungle. She could sense it in Clara’s inability to remember exactly what she did when she was there. She had been in the jungle for over a month, but hadn’t specifically mentioned any friends, any events, any places. Clara had always been pretty bad with money, but recently she had been blindly swiping her card. She never took out any cash. And she didn’t talk to her parents—Not on Skype or over the phone.

She didn’t know how to ask Clara about all of this.

When they walked into the studio, Suzie noticed that the blanket had been moved. The bed hadn’t been *made*, the blankets were still thrown around the top of the bed, but Suzie

remembered specifically that she had been the last one out of bed, so she had thrown the blanket to *his* side, and now they were bunched up on *her* pillow—

“Where is my laptop?”

She had left it on the bed.

“Francisco?”

He was bringing in their overnight bag.

“Yes?”

“Where is my laptop?”

“Suzie, we aren’t even home, not even for five minutes, and—”

“This is serious. Francisco, I think someone was . . . *in* here.”

Francisco put the bags down and walked around the place. Suzie followed.

“I think. . . you are right.” Francisco walked into the kitchen and picked up a plate of glass from the sink. Suzie felt the draft from the window above the stove.

“Did someone—” She walked over to the window. The glass had been removed. Someone had pushed it out, plate by plate, and placed it in the sink. Francisco looked stern.

“We need to tell Eliza.”

“Do you think she came in here?”

“I hope so.”

The poor girl and her boyfriend had been robbed. Whoever it was, they had taken Suzie’s computer and all of the remote controls from the villa. They had left the TV, which made Eliza think they had come on foot and didn’t have a getaway car.

Eliza offered Suzie money for another computer, and told her she could stay a couple of months for free. The girl had only nodded through silent tears.

Eliza called Luis in.

“You’ll need to add bars to the standards. Whoever it was, they came back when Francisco and Suzie were gone.”

“What? No.”

“Yes. They came in through the window. They took a computer, a few remote controls—”

“How did they know that they wouldn’t be there? This is very strange, Eliza.”

“You’re right. It’s too much of a coincidence.” She thought about her time burning leaves by the river. “You don’t think someone could be watching the place, do you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll put bars on all the windows. And if I catch that *mae*—” Luis shook his head.

Eliza called Pancho. He insisted on flying out right away.

“It’s an inside job. How do you know it’s not Luis or the maid?”

“It’s not them. That’s what my intuition is telling me. I treat them both so well.”

“Shouldn’t you let them go, just to be safe?”

Eliza understood what Pancho was saying. She had certainly let people go in the past. There was that one young man, his beautiful body glistening in the pool, who Eliza let go because he was begging the guests for food and money. He had taken a large shit on the bar as a farewell gift. But Luis and Estrella weren’t like that. It was probably some young kid, probably a drug addict.

That afternoon, it poured. Luis couldn't do anything on the grounds. He stayed in the kitchen and built a new bed so Estrella could have her own. He was drenched just walking from the bar to the kitchen.

Estrella didn't get the linens down in time. She would have to wash them again.

Francisco and Suzie were stuck by the kitchen when it happened. The rain was so hard that Suzie couldn't even see Clara's studio.

"I have to talk to her today. I have to at least tell her—"

"*What?*" The rain drowned out her voice. Francisco couldn't hear her even though they were right next to each other.

"*I'm going to see Clara!*" She shouted. She tried to run to the studio, but her sandals slipped off. She was already soaked by then, and so she started walking. There wasn't a point to running anymore.

Suzie reached the studio and pushed the door open. She saw Clara's body face-down on the bed.

She's dead. She killed herself.

No, she wasn't. Clara looked up at Suzie with confused, glassy eyes. Suzie closed the door. The sound of the rain dulled.

"Is my pizza here?"

Suzie looked around the studio. It was a mess. There were dead beetles and ants everywhere. It smelled—No one had cleaned the bathroom. The TV was on. It was that crime show again.

"Clara, I just wanted to let you know that we don't have to pay for July."

“What? Why not?”

“Eliza is giving us a couple of months off. I . . . my laptop was stolen. Last night.”

“Last night?” Clara had been walking around the grounds in her zombie-state. How had she not seen or heard anything? She sat up. “I’m sorry, Suzie.”

“Yeah.”

They heard a crack and the air escaped both of their lungs. The atmosphere was replaced with static, and then the lights went out, the TV turned off. There was still a bit of sunlight. Suzie could still see Clara.

“Jesus. This storm is bad.”

Suzie sat on the bed.

“Can you tell me what has been going on?” Clara’s hair was growing in unevenly. “What happened with you and Richard?”

“It’s not just that. It’s that, but—I don’t know. Something happened when I was in the jungle. I’m not sure. I’m not sure if my memories are real, or if I just made them up. And I don’t have any way to prove that they happened.”

“Well what—What do you know happened?”

“Richard tried to have sex with me. Or he did have sex with me. He didn’t . . . finish. He said he was drunk. I hadn’t wanted him to.”

Suzie nodded. Clara started to cry and crawled into her lap. Suzie hugged her and kissed her fuzzy scalp. After an hour, she spoke between heaves.

“The—apartment. It’s—a—mess.”

“It’s okay. I’ll clean it up.”

“Don’t—get—maid—”

“I won’t. I promise. I’ll do it. It’s okay.”

Suzie cleaned until the sun went down and she couldn’t see. She found the pizza boxes in the fridge. They began to smell, especially after the power went out. Suzie closed the door on them. She’d have to deal with that in the morning.

The rain stopped around midnight, Suzie couldn’t really tell, and then started up again. The thunder and lightning continued all night.

The tube was found in several pieces on top of the haunted rock. Luis looked at it with his arms folded. Then Estrella swept it up. Luis tied it up in a trash bag. Then, Suzie came out of her studio with eight empty pizza boxes. She looked light, easy. Happier than when she had first come.

The power was still out. The man from the ICE came—He looked like he was about nineteen. He stood on one of Luis’s ladders and looked at the pole, went to his truck, looked at the pole, and went back to his truck again. They had power back by two.

Clara went to the main house around three and called her mom. The studio was much nicer. Suzie had made it smell like chlorine and bleach instead of urine and pizza.

“Hi, Mom.”

“...Clara?”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

“Where *are* you? The number that came up was just a bunch of—When are you coming home? Where are you? I’ll send a cab. Don’t hang up. Don’t hang up! Are you still there?!”

“Mom, yeah. I’m here. I’m in Costa Rica.”

“You’re *where*?”

“I’ve been here for a few months. For a little too long.”

“Are you okay? Are you—Do you need money? Come home, Clara.”

Clara started to cry again. She whimpered on the phone.

“Whatever happened, I don’t care. Just come home. I’ll buy you a ticket right now. *Paul! It’s Clara!*” She heard her dad fight her mother for the phone. “*No, let me talk to her, you always piss her off. . . Clara? Are you still there?*”

“Mom, yes. I’m fine. I’m here. It’s a nice place, where I am right now. I’m with Suzie. Remember her? From graduation?”

“Okay. I’m buying a ticket right now. You need to transfer in Florida.”

“Mom, please just stop. I don’t know if I want to come home.”

She could tell by the muffled voice of her father that her mother had put her on speakerphone.

“*Tell her she’s coming back tomorrow, and that’s it.*”

“*Paul, you know that’s just going to make her want to stay there. Haven’t you learned how to talk to—*”

“*Say it however you want, then.*”

“Mom! Mom. It’s fine. Dad’s right. I do want to come home.” They hadn’t changed too much. “I just—I look different.”

“Honey, I don’t care what you look like. Please just come home. No matter what happened, it’s fine.”

“There’s another thing. I don’t have any cash. I’ve been here too long. I’ll probably have to pay a fine.”

“How much?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I’ll look it up. Send me your bank account information and I’ll deposit it into your bank account today. It’ll be all right. How much money do you have right now?”

“In the bank? Nothing. I’m in the red. On me? I think—three dollars?”

“Jesus Christ, Clara. Okay. I’ll just put five grand in there. What’s your bank account information?”

Clara pulled a chair up to the phone and sank into it. Her mom sounded so worried.

No one saw Richard for several days, but his truck was there. It didn’t move. Finally, Eliza decided to use her extra key and open his bedroom. She had Luis follow her in.

Eliza had a fear that one day, someone would die in one of her rooms. It could happen if someone was young, old. She had suspected that Clara would be the one, and was surprised when she emerged from the studio rolling her suitcase and weeping.

Richard’s space smelled good. He had photos of his wife, of his daughter. He had a lot of furniture that Eliza had never seen before. It looked like it came from *Sarchi*—hand-crafted, solid wood.

Richard was not there.

“Let’s give it a few more days. Maybe he just went somewhere and didn’t tell us.”

Estrella cleaned out Clara’s studio. Ants had taken over the kitchen. The toilet needed to be scrubbed and scrubbed again.

The day Costa Rica lost to Holland, Suzie and Francisco had been at the beach. Costa Rica lost in penalties. They sat on the beach after the game and, after his depression started to subside, Francisco told her about a romantic trip he had planned to Granada, Nicaragua.

“I can take a day off work, so it will be like, a three-day weekend. It’s a very pretty place. Cheap, too.” He said. Suzie sighed.

“That sounds nice. Sure.”

The day Costa Rica lost to Holland was also the day the police showed up with a photo of Richard. He was dead. They had found his body downstream, a single bullet in his head.

“This was the address he put on his customs form,” they explained.

Eliza showed them his apartment, his truck.

“He was here for about a month already. He was supposed to stay for two more. He was quiet, kept to himself, mostly. He was on the Internet a lot. No one here knew him or spoke to him.” Eliza left out the part where he went to the beach with Clara. She was back in the states now, anyway.

The police looked, they took photos. They walked all over the property. They saw some broken plastic on the haunted rock and photographed that. They took photos of the river past the mango grove, and asked everyone questions.

No one had seen Richard since the day of the huge storm, the one that had knocked out the power. That much was clear and consistent.

But no one seemed to *miss* the man. His own daughter wanted nothing to do with him or his vast wealth. She hadn't even wanted the body. His son cared about the money, but he was in a mental institution. He had a string of lawyers willing to help him get out and reclaim some of his inherited wealth. Richard's name made everyone tighten, especially the little Nicaraguan girl living in the kitchen.

Luis told the police right away that his pistol had been missing since that night.

"I keep my storage room open sometimes. The gun was gone. I didn't think about it because we had just been robbed, and I offered Eliza the gun, and so I guess I just thought she had gotten it for her own protection."

"Did Richard know about the gun?"

"He had been in my storage room before."

The police questioned Luis, but ultimately concluded that Richard's death had been a suicide. The more they learned about this man, the less even they liked him.

Eliza herself was breaking a couple of laws—Probably some tax evasion, and she wasn't sponsoring the maid the had living in the kitchen. Overall, though, nothing violent.

The police ended up taking Richard's truck, his furniture. Once they were done and stopped asked questions, Luis demanded that Eliza get a guard dog.

Eliza wanted to wait before telling Pancho and Lalo that Richard had killed himself by the river, but word traveled too fast in Costa Rica. Manuel was all-too-eager to tell them about what was going on, and he, like everyone else, exaggerated the story.

“Ma, Dad just called and said your gardener murdered an American guy so he could steal a truck?”

“No, Lalo. Richard killed himself. He was a sad, lonely man. It’s terrible. Don’t listen to your father’s crazy stories.”

“He *killed* himself? Was it in the news? Did anyone see it?”

“No, no. He just took Luis’s gun, went down to the river and shot himself, I guess. The police were here and everything.”

“Why didn’t you tell us, Ma?”

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Worry us? This is crazy. I’m going to come there for a week. What the fuck is going on?”

“Lalo, Richard was a sad, lonely person. But yes, please come. It would make me feel better.” Eliza was going to get a German Shepherd and Luis was going to train him. Still, she wanted Lalo’s company.

“Do you feel safe?”

“I do. The other guests seem to be handling it well, too.”

“Oh, God. This is going to be so bad for business.”

Eliza didn’t tell him that the judge and Isabelle had already left and gone to one of the Barcelo hotels.

“No, no. It’s not like we’re going to tell everyone who walks in.”

“Yeah, but *ticos* talk.”

“Well yeah, but everyone knows that nothing they say is really true.”

Lalo was going to come at the beginning of August. Eliza heard a honk. Manuel was at her gate with a large, strange package that was wrapped in twine. Eliza guessed it was her fig tree. She hung up on Lalo and opened the gate for him.

“I have enough trees, Manuel.”

“Well just take this one, for the good old times.”

Suzie and Francisco decided to take a larger house, the poolside suite. Francisco wanted to talk to a realtor and draw up an actual lease agreement, and Suzie was taking a class in Alajuela so she could be certified to teach English. Francisco got another cell phone in his name and let Suzie use it.

Suzie talked to Clara on Skype every so often. She was living at home, and her parents were more or less supportive. Her mother was making her go to therapy, and her father was making her do community service: in part to see how people with problems *really* lived, and in part to “earn” the money they had spent pulling her out of credit card debt and her fines.

“Come visit me,” Clara suggested. “My town is boring as fuck.”

“Can’t possibly be more boring than La Garita. I had a conversation with a chicken the other day.”

“Are the police still there?”

“No. They’re pretty sure Richard just killed himself.”

“Good. I mean, not *good*, but, you know what I mean. Eat a mango for me. I miss them.”

“They’re actually all gone. They’re not in season anymore.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” It was nighttime. Since moving into the poolside suite, Francisco and Suzie had started skinny dipping at night. The other night, they hadn’t realized that Luis had just poured fresh chlorine into the pool, and their eyes and skin burned. Suzie’s hair got crunchy. They made sure to notice when he was doing that. He hadn’t that night, and Suzie kind of wanted to go for a swim. Look up at the stars. Listen to music, maybe have a beer.

House Rules

First, we expect everyone at Eliza's to respect other guests and the space.

Please no pets — service animals only. If you happen to see a stray animal, please do not feed it.

This just encourages them to stay long after you have gone! If you have a question about an animal, please inform Eliza before touching or feeding it.

Every guest receives a key to the main gate. We ask everyone who comes in at night to lock the gate and not leave it open overnight. Basically, if the gate is locked when you come inside, please ensure it is still locked after you've come in!

While most rooms have their own kitchen, we also have a kitchen area and a communal laundry room. Please clean up the community spaces if you use them. Costa Rica has lots of insects, and food that sits out will attract them very quickly.

Please smoke outside and please, no recreational drug use.

****Guests are expected to comply with Costa Rican laws.****

